

# Novella's Curtain

---

## 0

At six a.m. I join the lightening storm, watch the electric forks strike down and disappear, somewhere out on a stagnant horizon. I have awoken to thunder again, booming and rattling showers through the beginnings of light. What had I been dreaming before it woke me? I stand on a white veranda, taking chaos in, feeling the buzzing air at my throat. I think of the Indian bird of thunder, crashing its giant wings and shooting lightning from its beak. I think of particles colliding, the jumble of unstable air. I think of Twinkie, my dog back home, cowering beneath the bed. I think of my mother in the static earth. Miles away from everything and I turn the same things over in my mind. I put one palm out into the rain. Like Woolf, I have always had stones in my pockets. I don't seem to be able to leave things behind, never completely. Is it in my blood? Little pebbles building in an overcoat. And now I am out here, of all places, putting out a palm. I am at the edge of the river, reaching into my reflection, thinking, 'who's that stranger with the short hair? She is standing in my way.'

① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

Watch the cursor flash. Then begin this without thinking...

'I put on a bra before I leave the house. I don't eat my banana on the bus into town. Or let people see I've got tampons in my bag. Or hair under my arms. Or diet pills in my Pez dispenser.

I think about my route after dark. Come nightfall this city is full of evils. A selection sack of hairbrushes and tissues I carry on my shoulder could inevitably catalyse an attack from which, like bread, I forthwith come sliced. So I stop carrying one. But I know it's really this body which presents the risk. This jumble-sale of breasts, legs, and lips can at any moment provoke a person, squatting like a spider in the webbed shadows of some back alley, to attack. To them my pagan screams will be subtitled; "no" is a girl on a fat pony shouting "faster, faster!" as she digs in her heels. There are whole industries dedicated to circulating this bogus translation.

It's just not safe for me out there. So I travel in groups. Or I stay in. I lock my windows. I lock my door. And outside the other half of my species is busy defending me from itself. They represent over ninety percent of the reasons it's not safe outside – i.e. crime. One hand grabs me, the other arrests it. I suppose I should consider myself lucky to be born without that pesky predisposition to bludgeon/rape/steal from other humans. Or should I? I was born with arguably an even *peskier* disposition to be a victim to all of the above. But they say biology is not determinism. I might bludgeon someone yet.'

I consider the whiskey in my palm. The fat bottle lies empty in the nest of wicker I fill with scrap paper and half-chewed gum. I'm getting too sober for this job.

'Consider for a moment, the inherent irony, the rawness of my deal. Permanent parts of my anatomy not only have a street value, but live lives of their own. Because these parts cannot usually be physically wrestled from me in public, strangers instead try to manipulate the most disingenuous of relationships with them. I often play eavesdropper, the idle intruder in the intricate escapades of their innate social life. I believe this is known as *my* 'sex life' – though my involvement appears to be preferentially minimal. Complete strangers want to buy drinks for these parts, invite them to parties, take them to movies. Others demand to know if they belong to

anyone else yet, and if so, if said owner possesses much in the way of upper-body strength. The amalgamation of these coveted parts become much like a Siamese twin, vastly more popular and appreciated than myself. I act as its miserable P.A., the one interested parties agree the venue with - *mine or yours?* What would it like in its dressing room before the show – *flowers or chocolates?* What will it be wearing at the premiere – *lace or dental floss?* Don't even get me started on haircuts. Interaction outside of these variables leads to a glazed or irritated look, like I've interrupted my twin mid-sentence. It makes you want to separate, finally have your own life, but of course removing this twin is near impossible. You are irrevocably conjoined, permanently attached to the thing which not only solicits unrelenting danger and abuse, but also makes you a second-class citizen in your own body.'

Down that glass. Swallow the last of an unhappy year, a place which existed before I was born, birthed this vile liquid into creation. Well, not *that* long before - hence the discount on price. But now there's nothing but the despondent sound of ice cracking. This is the sound of another restless evening. Where do we go from here? The cursor is flashing...

'There's this myth. It consists of two sacrosanct little words, a mantra, first heard from my longsuffering grandmother. You'd hear them somewhere between making my grandfather's dinner, polishing the silver, or pulling a rag mop across the floor... Later, she would chant them in her chair at the home; she'd just flick them out like she'd flossed them straight from her false teeth. She even whispered them on her deathbed. I don't know whether the concept was spread subliminally through knitting circles, or the W.I., but she picked it up somewhere and never let it go. "*Women's commune,*" she would whisper. And her eyes would light up like she had seen God at the window.'

Print. I watch the reams of fever ribbon from the electric archive. I set the article on the table, attack it with scribble, more scribble, and then cross out, cut... I take a moment to consider the result, head on one side. Woozy. I ball it and toss it over my shoulder like a pro. It was too honest. Or feminist. Or, whatever. People don't like that kind of thing. My publisher calls it 'divorce-talk'. No one wants to hear the truth on men until they've finally left them. Then suddenly your pen looks like a piñata stick and everyone wants a turn. Apparently reality isn't a good enough read unless it's sweetened with vengeance. *I've had enough.* I glance at the computer, sensing my inbox. One new message...one new message...always one new message. The email from Genoveva is sitting in there, waiting. No. I'm not going. Quit haunting me Grandma.

In the kitchen I pop a new wine. Mixing drinks is a lot like mixing paint; I imagine it all churning into a useless bruised brown in my stomach, only good for washing away. But I'll drink to that. Swilling the red in the curve of my palm, this orbicular liquid could easily be blood. That's how easily I could become a bludgeoner of people. I don't need a commune. I can join the winning team. My face reflects in the glass, a swirling red Picasso. Yet I can still make out the silly semi-smile, my hair looking faded, floppy and harmless already. Not exactly *deadly* material. I try to tame this hair into one direction. Even in the primitive reflection of the glass I can see my hairdresser is a squirrel. Suddenly I have a vision of my late mother at the tanning shop.

'Darker! Darker!' she bellows at the salon girls, whipping them with the colour chart, 'I want *darker!*' I recall her playing chicken with the developing time; she was rewarded with lengthy ethnicity debates at customs. Try explaining how a woman, whose passport claims 'Caucasian', has skin like a spoiling tangerine. Poor determined Mother. Maybe a few years

down the line I'll find myself at the editors, font chart in hand, bellowing 'I want it bigger! Bigger!', whipping everyone into the water cooler. Though I'd like to think I was safer than most from the 'girls always become their mothers' curse, what with me not seeing mine in a decade. Unless you count the funeral last month. Because that's what this whole mood is about, isn't it? But a month ago I was drifting about at her wake like Banquo's ghost – the one person people didn't expect to show up.

In the name of macabre tradition, everyone had peered into the casket, muttering last goodbyes to the silicone-enhanced body. I had hung back, dithered about the flower arrangement for a while, poking orchids for what felt like an eternity, until everyone else had filtered away. Off they marched like a train of black ants, out to the mounds of the buffet. I watched a man take a bite of a canapé and put it back. Suddenly he looked up and we exchanged an awkward glance, which I broke by averting my eyes to the casket instead. But this was what I had been avoiding all day. The reality. I just stared at the body like it was naked, something simultaneously born and slaughtered right in front of me. There it was, manipulated neatly inside its box, stiff and cold as china. *The body*. She had been put out for the world to admire, one last time. The unsettling relic of an inherent order, one I had resisted, tried to escape. Even if it meant escaping my own mother. All her life she had been reinvented, redressed, repainted. Like a real doll, all those years she had been fumbled and fondled but now the weariness of the children was irremediable. They had set her aside forever. Some higher force had simply seen fit to tidy this away, this old toy. The ugly fingerprints of familiarity were all over it. How many times had I seen this happen before?

In the kitchen I pour myself another glass. I sip at it, considering what a 'mother' really is, trying to name what I have lost. My mind wanders to the men who would proposition her in

the market, whistling at us from behind the aubergines. Ironical. She was just a body to them, just another body, and now she really *is* just that. What had her life's work (namely of the surgical variety) got her? Might as well have lived in that casket her whole life. Her value was the same to them. But she never saw it. I envision the living lips, the way she would slide them up and over teeth, the same way a woman takes off her sweater. They revealed an alluring smile, white and clean, flashing at you from across the dinner table. She loved to bear those straight, sharp teeth. She would puncture men like balloons. That was her reward. I smile. That was *why* she did it. All that effort meant she got to play. She got to be part of something...their world. She got to play with those simple, superficial children, just the way she had always dreamt they would play with me. The way she thought all girls, all women, should be played with. They come out of the womb, covered in fleshy plastic wrap, to be unpacked and put into ribbons and dresses. Into motherhood and marriages. They play the role of 'girl', they play the role of 'woman', and then, when they can't play either any more, they are packed away. They become invisible, the way she became invisible to my father.

I position my empty glass on the counter, considering the rest of the bottle. For ten years I was happy she was gone. Just because 'gone' now meant she was shut six feet under in a casket, didn't mean I needed to romanticize or embellish this arrangement. The simple reality was that for all her plucking and preening, she was now a scruffy, shriveled doll put back in its box. She had failed to shape me into a good, marketable thing like herself. All I got from her was birth, birth and a bill for a \$3000 box, of which my father paid nothing.

'She had wanted to be cremated,' he had stated matter-of-factly, though she had never said anything of the kind. For him, the whole ordeal seemed about as troubling as a queue outside Steak Shack.

I empty the last of the bottle into my glass, simultaneously pushing the last of this emotional disaster to the back of an increasingly fuzzy mind. I know I need to get away for a while. I can't think. I can't write. I can't sleep. And alcoholism is expensive therapy.

I wander casually to my desk, perch on its edge. My fingers idly wander to the keys; bring up the email from Genoveva. Still *not* going. That would be desperate ...wouldn't it? I could hear Grandma chanting in her chair.

Genoveva, or *Genoveva Retreat Pour Les Femmes*, was the ever favourite hotspot for any female celebrity 'worth her uterus'. A colleague of mine had recently interviewed the celebrity chef Boris Featherstone whose wife had divorced him shortly after her visit. 'Said I had become an odious male presence,' he had reported, amidst allegations of homosexual treachery. My friend's article had drawn Genoveva's omnipotent eye, and in turn it had fallen upon me and my modest little lesbian column.

Initially I had been about as fond of their attention as Boris. It was true that the unusual retreat had something of a reputation for churning out bra-less artists, anarcho-feminist vegans, and abundant billows of divorce papers. I sensed the retreat had the potential to push 'eccentricities' over the edge. But what was wrong with that? If Hugh Hefner could live in a robe without looking like a refugee, why couldn't I try for three days? I sighed, resigning myself to the office chair, letting myself slowly spin around with my thoughts.

I have never been against free holidays/free anything but I fancied sometimes a gift horse has something in its mouth worth noticing – like the FMD virus. But this was a job offer. They wanted me to write an article about my visit for their annual magazine, asking that blessed question; what does it mean to be a woman? This was my mission. So what if I hated it? About to celebrate their 20<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of success...couldn't be that bad, could it? Still, their

expectations were outlined in machete-like flattery. They thought I was this big ‘feminist thinker’, a ‘face for lesbian issues’, or perhaps best of all, ‘the guiltless woman writer’.

Genoveva’s emails always left me feeling dazed and conflicted, as though smashed with a diamante brick; on the one hand it was shiny and beautiful; on the other it was objectionable and potentially hazardous to my health.

I headed to the sink to splash some cool water, regarding my face there, I found myself wondering if it *was* a lesbian face, a face of issues. Maybe I wasn’t what they wanted anyway.

I ended up, like most writers, dabbling reluctantly in the alchemy of stereotypes. I studied my boyish hair – dark, messy – something of a crow’s nest sitting atop the long telephone pole neck. I studied my plaid pajamas. Is that not the banner of the gay woman? Plaid - the lumberjack-cum picnic blanket. My tree-felling pajamas had betrayed me. I sighed and sent myself to bed...*alone*. Could I really be a lesbian if I wasn’t sleeping with a woman? I needed someone to be my evidence. Together we formed the necessary equation, woman + woman = lesbian. Half of it had been absent for some time.

I had only had two proper relationships. The first was with a long-haired flower child with a permanent line of avocados ripening on her sill. The second had been a musician who drank whiskey out of a Winnie the Pooh mug and head butted men off stage. Neither had struck me as particularly promising. It had mostly been drug-addled solstice parties, or drink-addled gigs with people nursing concussions. Still, it had dented the ennui. Nowadays the ennui was starting to look worryingly permanent. I was feeling increasingly like an aspirant, playing the Virgin Queen without husband or heir, as if at any moment some benevolent male force might rise up and call me a heretical fraud and proceed to try and wrestle my title from me. Surely a gay writer should be a practicing one? Suppose someone pointed this out? Should I just be like



Morrissey and declare celibacy now? Lesbian celibacy? This was *really* stupid. Still, lying alone in bed with my convenient hair and picnic pajamas, I didn't feel much like the face of anything. Well, sloth perhaps. Something had to be done.

And so it was out of some sort of sexually affronted insomniatic crisis that I decided I was going to go. I was going to meet these people who considered my ideas 'feminist', my writing innately that of a 'woman', and my face profoundly 'lesbian'. And to celebrate my conquest, I lumberjacked straight to the fridge and poured myself a large glass of congratulatory sherry. Or three. In fact I did not wake up until 3pm the following afternoon, editor ringing the phone off the wall, guacamole all over the pillows, and a large vibrator buzzing down one side of the bed. I would later come to consider this a mental breakdown. The first breakdown of what would soon become a turbulent venture into the unknown, unwanted, and unsolicited.



Pulling up outside Virago House, I nursed a hangover with large sunglasses and the icy dregs of a neon Slurpee. Though the images surrounding me implied I might still be drunk. Just entering the Genoveva complex itself had felt like infiltrating Roswell. Everywhere you looked these beautiful celebrity aliens only read about in fan-fiction press, or seen in manipulated photos, breezed the lavish gardens in maxi-dresses and bare feet. The cherry trees and clean-shaven folds of grass were penetrated only by the striking white buildings, each referred to as a 'sisterhood'. I supposed inside they might work a lot like a sorority house – if sorority houses had Jacuzzis and personal chefs. Driving past, those bleached buildings seemed almost mysterious, like haunted

temples I simultaneously dreaded and couldn't wait to enter. I mostly worried about the ghosts inside, my 'sisters' for the weekend.

I had been assured they would be familiar with my work, my name. Of course they would have no idea what I *looked* like. That was the magic of being a writer. You could be famous without ever setting foot in the limelight. You stayed in the cozy shadows, where you never had the press laughing at your weight, or accusing your toupee of looking like a throw pillow.

I pulled my keys from the ignition and held them in clammy hands. Perhaps if anything I was meant to be hideous. Perhaps these people expected some beak-nosed bibliophile, with skin turned to figs from all the creativity being thirstily extracted from its person. They wanted a proper hermit, a bell-tolling Quasimodo who turned misery into poetry. Was I the ugly face with a beautiful tale? Of course they were all going to be immaculate...those *real* celebrities. I considered reversing. I could pretend I left the oven on. And the iron. And the bath running.

I hooked one leg out of my car, studying its busy attire. Maybe I shouldn't have worn the 'casual-smart' jeans with K-Swiss. Suppose they were expecting short-shorts and snow boots? What if I wasn't being eccentric enough? I was terminally fraudulent. For some reason I suddenly thought of the writer Mel Pier's macaroni necklace, how it had caused quite a stir at the premiere of the movie based on her bizarre novel 'Weaving the Stair'. She had reportedly 'gushed' that her toddler was the designer. How, 'delightfully eccentric', everyone had gabbled. Though if the leading lady, Cassandra Hannah, had done the same thing they would have detoured her limo to the Wonderland Psychiatric Center.

I hastily baby-stepped my way towards the building, it seemingly getting larger and larger as I continued to shrink myself miniscule with paranoia. Was I their Mel Pier? A droll little scribbler, whose taste in pasta-based jewelry and other eccentricities was to be indulged in

the name of artistic license? I envisioned being patted on the head as a Genoveva representative stuck my article on the communal fridge.

I opened the low gate which wailed like a siren. Again I thought to make my excuses and escape. But I took a deep breath, pretended this was rehab, and carried on. The small courtyard had a deep pond, inside Koi squirmed and lipped ripples in its surface. Around it had been planted the flawless blooms of azaleas and well-clipped rose bushes. I could hear the low hum of bees foraging inside. Just breathe. A small cypress tree was casting a cool shadow over the door ahead, the arms bent in supplication to its bleached stone path. I followed it awkwardly to the colossus of a door. Sweating up to its brass knocker, I envisioned all the glittering celebrities inside awaiting Mel Pier, pasta lady, and here I was, Plain Jane, alcoholic. I breathed deeply again, forced myself to think of the blinking cursor back home, and knocked. If all else failed, I could just shout ‘trick or treat’ and hold out the Gucci bag my editor gave me last Christmas. I was at their mercy, feeling small. Everyone inside would be these huge stars and I- Suddenly the door swung open to reveal a tiny girl.

‘Virago House?’ a woman seemed to ventriloquise through her. ‘Oh gosh you must be Christine? Lovely to meet you I’m sure.’ Tossing her blond ponytail she proffered a petite hand.

‘Yes, I-’

‘You’ll be staying with *us* this weekend. Don’t look so mortified. Trust me; you’ve landed the *good* sisterhood.’ She seized my fingers with a mature wink. ‘Is that Gucci?’ she demanded suddenly clamping them, ‘oh thank god it *is*!’ She released. ‘Don’t fakes make you just *sick*? In Atlanta they got my luggage confused with some vagrant imitation. Can you imagine?’

‘Awful,’ I said. Because it was. This girl could not have been more than twelve, but she spoke like someone three times that age. Not to mention dressed like one. There she was, framed in the doorway, wearing a little teal trouser suit and heels like someone had attacked Ellen Degeneres with a shrink ray.

‘You don’t recognize me, do you?’ she said, motioning me inside with a chagrin expression. ‘I can’t tell you how *trying* it has been having to introduce myself today. No one ever expects the difference between you and your character do they? It’s *shocking*.’

Inside, the hall was bright and clean with a long parquet floor stretching to double glass doors. The winking sequin edge of an outdoor pool was just visible. I placed my bag on the nearby dresser, pausing to enjoy the large vase of sunflowers. They had been articulately placed so that their golden fingertips were illuminated in the soft blush of a Tiffany lamp. I pretended to fascinate myself with this, as the strange girl had become distracted by the adjacent wall mirror, busily reapplying lipstick. Above her head hung an elegant still-life, a bowl of pastiche glowing fruit. The walls seemed to drip with their juicy abundance. It was like designer Eden here. I was in love.

‘Character?’ I asked tentatively.

She glanced at me in the glass, regarding me the way a mother might her child. ‘Bailey?’ she sighed. She pressed and rubbed her lips saying, ‘here...we...go again.’ She finished and turned. To my surprise, she candidly screwed up her small face and bellowed, ‘Aw gee Danny, do I *gotta*?’

‘Oh my god!’ I laughed suddenly, ‘you’re-’

‘Reagan Montana. Yes, the beloved daughter of heartthrob Louie Roscoe on *all nine* seasons of Heartbreak Hospital.’ She checked herself in the mirror once more, and then folded

her arms. 'Well that's you up to speed. Want to meet everyone else? They haven't all arrived but still,' she continued poignantly, 'the minute I saw you I knew who *you* were.'

'R-really?'

'Well, yes.' She regarded my confused expression with harrowing superiority. 'Darling, it was obvious. You're nothing like the other two we're missing.'

I felt myself turning red. 'Well I know I'm no Mel Pier but-'

'Mel Pier?' she interrupted, 'that degenerate who wore spaghetti to a premiere?'

'Well it was macaroni but-'

'God she's not *here* is she?' she shot a glance at the dresser like she might be squatting inside. 'I just *couldn't* cope! God darling why would I mistake you for *her*? She's not in this sisterhood is she? Oh my god I'll move! I swear to god I'll move!' She put her miniature hand out like she was stopping traffic, 'just tell me right now if she'll be here because I'll transfer to Hera House. I heard they have Boris Featherstone's ex-wife. I swear to god I'll leave right now!'

'She's not here,' I said uneasily, starting to wish that she were.

'Good. The last thing I want on this trip is *drama*.' She tossed her head. 'So anyway, when you meet the others don't worry about being confused with anyone else who's *late*. Or your weird friend.'

'Oh we're not-'

'Yes, the other two are just *unmistakable!*' she insisted. 'One is over sixty and the other is a - well a Barbie whore frankly.'

With that she turned, clicking away on her heels, idly beckoning for me to follow.

# ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

It seems fitting how we first met. She was standing alone by the window, a tall black silhouette, androgynous against the light pouring in. As we entered the head turned instinctually, like a fox catching our scent. No one else would have noticed the thing that passed between us. She stepped into the light with a shrewd smile, revealing hair that hung down to her middle in a long ravel of red.

‘This is Ashley,’ Reagan stated, ‘she’s an actress like me.’

‘We’ve been waiting for you,’ Ashley said, looking me up and down.

‘Oh?’, was all I could think to reply. I’d seen everything she had ever made. Every porno. We mutually stared.

‘She *knows* she’s late,’ Reagan interrupted offhandedly, then snatched my arm and walked me through the adjoining archway. There was something inherently wrong about being bossed about by a child. Yet somehow I was powerless to resist her tiny determination as it swept me into the company of someone else. ‘This is Sunday. In case you don’t recognize *her* either.’

She referred to the fragile thing, sitting cross-legged, craned over the bible in its lap. It looked up, skeletal and with a detached smile that told you it didn’t see the world quite right anymore. I quickly recognized that bag of bones, filling with dread. This was ‘Sunny’ Peterson, former rock star legend. Lesbian icon. Then she was in a car wreck, got the fear of god put into her, quite literally. Now she worked for the other side, the Judas of the LGBT community. Now she protested our marriages, boycotted anything we touched, and tried to repossess our children

for god. Not to mention she played country now – bad country. This weekend was going to be interesting.

‘Well hello!’ she beamed, hitching up the circles below her eyes. ‘Christine, the...the writer?’ She struggled up, letting the bible fall on the floor. ‘Careless!’ she said, tossing it back onto the chair, then shot out her bony hand.

‘Sunny Peterson?’ I tried optimistically, ‘I think I still have your first album somewhere.’ The wrong thing to say.

‘Album?’ she said, and suddenly she had her other hand on top of the handshake, closing it like a steel trap. ‘By the grace of god, I don’t do that kind of thing anymore. *None* of that kind of thing. I’ve seen the error of my ways.’ She pulled me closer with strange urgency, ‘have you?’ she whispered.

‘Sorry?’ I glanced at Reagan, hoping she would intervene, but she just rolled her eyes.

‘Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your own personal savior?’

Great. Running that old social gauntlet again. ‘Um,’ I said, casually trying to pull my hand away, ‘we’re not really on speaking terms.’

‘I know *exactly* what you mean,’ she said, tightening her grip. ‘But one day you’ll wake up and see. One day you’ll wake up and everything will have changed.’ Her eyes reached into mine, rummaging for something to latch onto. ‘I know you’re confused right now. Confused like *her*.’ She looked past me.

Ashley was leaning against the archway, looking amused. ‘I don’t think we’re confused at all,’ she said, ‘I’m not confused. Are you confused Christine?’

‘Not exactly,’ I said. I never knew that someone holding your hand could make you so intensely uncomfortable. With someone in it, personal space becomes steadily claustrophobic.

‘I can help you,’ Sunday said firmly, ‘I can help all of you.’

‘Well,’ the redhead smiled, crossing the room, ‘maybe you can start by letting go of Christine.’ She gently separated our hands, Sunday glaring, like she’d cut them off. ‘Otherwise, Christine might get the idea that you’ve taken a *special* shine to her. Hm, Sunny?’ She slid her arm like silk around my middle. ‘You should know that’s a big biblical no-no now.’

The bible-bashing skeleton had had me hostage, probably with a bomb called ‘the rapture’ in its blouse, and the fox saved me. It’s wrong to love people so immediately.



Dinner was ‘butter poached lobster served with a light mascarpone cheese sauce over tender orzo pasta’. It reminded me of macaroni cheese – expensive macaroni cheese. There wasn’t much conversation to be had. Reagan didn’t like the food and went to bed early, complaining of a headache induced by ‘too much drama’. This left Ashley and I with Sunday, who treated us to general reproach and opinions that sounded a lot like an audio book of the bible.

‘I used to be like you,’ she said, moving food around and around the plate. She seemed to be moving it everywhere but her mouth. ‘It gets lonely though... all the lies. The human deceptions. We need something bigger than us.’

‘Is that why you don’t eat Sunny?’ Ashley sighed finally, ‘because you like *everything* to be bigger than you? No please, enlighten us. Which scripture tells us how to starve ourselves?’

‘Laugh all you want,’ Sunday had snarled, ‘you’ll see.’

Climbing the stairs to my room, I sensed there were less turbulent meals to be had along the Gaza Strip. Who thought putting Loony Toons in with her sworn enemies was a good idea?



Maybe they were hoping the weekend would turn Agatha Christie and she'd poison everyone's fancy mac 'n' cheese. The rich do love a good intrigue. No, too clichéd. Maybe I'm meant to write her out of her career. Though, I didn't see how she needed me for that. Her fan base was steadily shrinking to a few southern states. I'd like to think that before long she'd be too lynch mob even for their tastes.

Head on the pillow, wrapped in Egyptian cotton, I still felt restless. I toss and turn, thinking, drifting off, then waking. Maybe this *is* rehab. My room is white, potentially sterile, and pretty sparse save for a monster Jacuzzi tub and a vase of white oleander. Together they could make a pretty extravagant suicide attempt. I can see everyone being called into the drawing room by Poirot, played by Reagan, to be told I was not in fact murdered at all. I simply slipped on my way to the tub, and accidentally ingested exceptionally poisonous flowers. *God, why can't I sleep?* I hit the light on, another Tiffany lamp – this place is like a warehouse of the things. I open the veranda windows to let some air in. A bleached antique book shelf looks to offer some relief, to what I suppose could be/is alcohol withdrawal. I pick up the thickest, oldest looking book and flop backwards with it onto the double bed. Cracking it open I read, 'diets must be fresh and reasonably appetizing. Most creep diets will be made up of oils, likely to oxidize at high temperatures; this may reduce the feed intake but it is just as likely to cause a major gut upset.' I turned to the spine and determined that the entire book was about piglet weaning. Brilliant.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

I awoke at dawn with the book parted, stuck to my face. I must have drifted off somewhere between 'feed availability' and 'the challenge of microbes'.

Breakfast is French toast. I'm first up and I pour maple syrup like it's going out of fashion. Is it too early for a drink? They must have a mini bar or something around here.

Cue latecomer number one. A shock of powder blue contacts, set in small tanned features appears in the doorway. There's a toss of brassy blonde hair, shape hacked from jaw to shoulders. 'You must be Christine!' she says in a babyish voice, then wiggles in, lace dress clinging in all the right places.

'Hi,' I say, swallowing the last of the toast. Everyone here is so skinny. It makes you want to never eat again. Or never stop eating. When this woman swallows her collar bone thrusts up like bronze handlebars. Race me, they seemed to say, *race me*. This was the sugary scream of recessive genes, begging to be dominated like soft-skinned sadists. A parlor trick, in a parlor full of aphrodisiacs. This woman had been made, designed, forged with the nip and tuck of aspiration; she was made for one thing and one thing only. This was Fei Yen Hannigan, former prostitute turned wife, turned ex-wife of Nicki Hannigan - jar-headed football player.

'I expect you know who I am,' she says, leaning over me to pour herself some juice. 'I arrived late last night. Sorry I couldn't make it sooner. You know how it is - work stuff.' She sat down next to me, diamante shades sparkling like a tiara above her forehead. 'But I'm glad I caught you alone,' she smiled through her pearl-capped teeth. And like something from a teen romance she touched my arm with her acrylic talons and said 'we need to talk.'

'Really?' I put my fork down. Why did everyone here need to touch me?

'I understand you're writing a little piece on us?'

'That's right.' I looked at her, trying not to imagine her with Nicki, rolling around the sallow sheets of a cheap motel, him tucking his wedding ring in his back pocket, then bills into her-

‘So, what, you’re watching us?’

‘Not... exactly.’ I tried to ignore the colossal breasts at my chin. This was intimidation.

‘Just asking a few questions-’

‘What kind of questions?’ she said abruptly. ‘Do I need my lawyer? She’s out of town, but I can get her here in a day - *if I need to.*’

‘Okay...’ I said, thrown. ‘But they’re really just general questions about being...you know...’ Her inch of mascara had smudged onto her Asian eyelid and I watched it flicker up and down.

‘Yes?’

‘About being a woman,’ I said, rubbing my own eye.

‘Oh. So nothing about Nicki, then?’ She pretended not to be disappointed. I pretended not to notice.

‘No, the editor was very specific,’ I notice she has lipstick on her teeth. Foundation in the creases of her eyes. I began to understand that you were never meant to look too closely at this kind of person. ‘Still, it’s really up to you how you respond to their topic.’

‘Right, okay then.’ She collected herself with a toss of her golden head, ‘I suppose you’ll want me to go first then?’

‘Well, I hadn’t really thought who-’ I watched the plucked brow rise, like an arrow pointing up from its tight quiver. ‘Sure... you can go first.’

① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

‘I think I most felt like a woman the day I married Nicki. I had the perfect dress, the huge cake, a designer bouquet - did you know you could have a designer bouquet? I didn’t. I didn’t know a lot of things before I met Nicki. I was just a poor little Chinese girl, making money where she could in the big cities.’

‘So you’d still recommend marriage? For other women, I mean.’

‘For some maybe.’

We had moved to sitting out by the pool; the morning sun wasn’t bright yet, but still she had put her sunglasses down over her eyes. Now all I could see was a tiny version of myself staring back at me.

‘Did it make you happy?’

‘For a time,’ she said, turning her head, ‘it makes everyone happy, for a time.’

‘So what was it that made you feel, “like a woman” being married to him?’

‘Purpose,’ she said immediately. ‘Suddenly I knew what I was. What to do. He gave me that. Working, I had to wear too many faces, be so many things at once. As his wife, the rules were simple. I fucked him. I looked pretty. I spent his money. I pretended not to know about the others. Everything was simple.’

‘You knew he had affairs?’ I pretended to be surprised. ‘It didn’t...bother you?’

‘That was not one of the rules,’ she smiled sweetly. ‘I had no right to be bothered. I was his, but he was never mine. That is how many marriages work.’

‘So you’re saying you most felt like a woman, being in an empty marriage?’ If she was going to be candid, so was I.

‘Why not?’ she shrugged, ‘every woman I knew was just the same. Women like you cannot know.’

‘Like me?’

‘Women with *choices*.’ She took a cigarette out of her clutch and lit it. ‘You smoke?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘See,’ she smiled, ‘choices.’ She put the cigarette to her lips. ‘I’ve smoked since I was ten.’

‘You have choices now,’ I pointed out. ‘So, would you get married again?’

‘Maybe. But it would be the same. Always the same with marriage.’ She looked at me, then smiled, ‘for women like *me*. Marrying another *woman*...I could not know.’

‘So,’ I said, intrigued, ‘what’s the difference?’

‘That’s the right question,’ she said, smoke spiraling through her teeth. ‘So I’ll tell you the way I see it. My mother told me a story once, when I was very young. The night before my father had come home drunk again, dragging another woman into their room by her hair. He had smashed a bottle against the wall and told her to get out, or he would cut her throat.’ She spoke like it had happened to someone else’s family, pleasantly detached. ‘That morning, as we swept up the glass, she told me the fable of the scorpion and the frog. You know it?’

I shook my head. ‘No.’

She leant back in her chair, smoke escaping her throat like a lazy dragon. ‘There was once a scorpion, who came to the bank of a mighty river. The water rushed past so quickly, he knew he would never cross it alone. But there was a frog who lived near the water. The scorpion called to him, saying “take me across on your back.” The frog replied, “how can I trust you will not sting me?” To this the scorpion said, “because then we would both drown.” So the frog

allowed the scorpion to climb on his back and he began to swim with him. But when they reached the middle of the river, the scorpion stung him. Feeling his body fill with the deadly poison the frog cried out to him, “you fool! Why have you done this?” And the scorpion said only, “it is in my nature.””

I wondered if that was not the most depressing story I had ever heard. She seemed unaffected by it. ‘Nature?’ I said. I recalled my failure at being a bludgeoner. ‘But you *would* marry again?’

She sighed, driving her cigarette into the arm of the chair. Then taking the glasses from her kohl eyes, she moved them back into her hair. ‘Years later I would hear the story again. In this version, when they reach the middle of the water, a long shadow appears, and the stork devours them both.’

‘Is that supposed to be a happier ending?’ I laughed.

‘That depends.’

‘On?’

‘Whether you would rather be harmed, or harmed by one you let into your trust.’

‘Oh that’s easy,’ rasped a voice behind us. I turned to find a handsome old woman framed in the patio doorway, a stance not unlike Audrey Hepburn. ‘I’ve been married four times and trust me, after the second you sort of get a taste for that sting dear.’ She crossed over to us, hand shielding her dark eyes from the sun.

‘Forgive me, if I disagree,’ Fei Yen said coolly.

‘I don’t know much about bugs, but I know enough about plants to know that a girl who smokes shouldn’t pretend she has no taste for poison.’ The woman smiled wryly. Then slowly, basking in our surprise, she took out a cigarette and lit it. ‘Nicotiana,’ she stated as she exhaled,

‘of the nightshade family. Deadly...’ she turned the cigarette in her fingers like a jewel, ‘if one consumes enough.’ She let it fall from her fingers, and then crushed it violently with her stiletto heel.

Fei Yen snorted. ‘So you *like* poison?’

‘What can I say?’ the woman laughed dryly, ‘poison flowers give the best nectar.’



Margaret Fairfax was a veteran designer, a woman who had been designing shoes before my mother was even trying to walk in them. She had impressive presence, a sort of classic femme fatale, a look that suggested she still carried a vintage revolver in her clutch.

‘Is that Luis Vuitton?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she said, having claimed Fei Yen’s seat. She’d watched her stalk into the house with the kind of pleasure only vindictive old people wear well. ‘So the writer has an eye for fashion?’

‘For detail,’ I said. ‘Comes with the territory. My mother loved his shoes.’

‘So now that I’ve scared off your mantis,’ said Margaret, ‘I suppose you’ll be wanting to hear my sad little story?’

‘It can be a story if you like.’ Why did they all keep referring to what I did as ‘little’? I might be a munchkin in celebrity land, but why patronize me into a complete sideshow?

‘Well I heard about your theme. It’s an interesting one dear, considering my career was spent trying to get everyone to *forget* I was a woman. Only way a bitch could get a heel in the door, see?’ she smiled. ‘Different times...but in many ways the same. Still, better give you

something, or word will get around I'm useless and they'll take me out back and shoot me. So...'

She put her fingertips together like a supervillainess. 'What's my angle? Well, how about I give you a story about my last agent, Georgia?' Seeing my expression she added, 'don't worry darling, she's dead. That's the point of the story.' I shifted uncomfortably. 'Anyway, what one had to love about Georgia was her lack of compromise. That's what made her brilliant. She was beautiful too - great skin. Of course everyone else in P.R. was grotesque, no sense of hygiene or style. A good agent doesn't have the time; a great agent *makes* time. But I suppose it was style that really got poor Georgie in the end...' She dusted Fei Yen's ash from the arm of the chair. 'If only she hadn't been so *cheap*.'

'Cheap?' I said flatly.

'That's what got her.'

'Being cheap kill-'

'Don't!' she said, 'don't use that word in there. It was an accident. The judge insisted.'

'Judge?'

'If you really need to know, for your little story I mean,' she indicated my pad airily, 'then I shall tell you. It all started when that earthquake hit Japan. Lots of people died and lost their dogs and everything, so the fabulous Giles Wood released a limited edition collection of neck scarves to help raise aid. *Giles Wood*, dear.' Her eyes bored into the back of my notepad.

'I don't-'

'He's the best accessory designer since god. Don't writers shop? He practically invented those python-effect leather clutches! Anyway he had conveniently retired, got cancer, or whatever, so all his stuff was still *hot*. But these neck scarves were à la mode!' she paused for effect. I nodded. 'We're talking thirty-six inches of *heavy* silk.'



‘Heavy?’

‘Oh god. The heavier the silk,’ she sighed exasperatedly, ‘the better quality it is. Either way this thing was embroidered with grade D, flawless diamonds. I remember everyone and their sister wanted one. I got mine early of course and Georgia was all over coveting the thing. Poor woman. But come spring, things had settled and a few freed up. I mean you can only wear something like that a few times before it becomes passé. A new earthquake comes along, etc. etc. So anyway Georgia comes to the villa one afternoon raving about a godsend. Apparently someone had put one of these things on EBay. Can you *imagine*? The world’s charity shop selling a *Giles Wood*? I mean, the season had passed, but still. Sacrilege, darling!’ She shook her head and went on. ‘Naturally I didn’t have the energy or the time to explain to her how it was hardly worth acquiring the thing *now*. It was becoming clear the girl had her limitations. But it was her business and I let her get on with it. The next thing I know, she’s dead.’

‘What?’ I said, looking up from my notes, ‘I mean, how?’

‘It seems she got the piece after all, but the heathen who previously owned it had hand-washed it in something. God knows what!’ She cackled. ‘Still, that something caused her to break out in the most dreadful hives all up her neck. In an attempt to avoid the vis-à-vis, the stupid woman didn’t answer her phone for two days. LA can be very unforgiving dear. And so the maid finds her keeled over on the fainting couch – asphyxiated they said.’ She dramatically shook her permed white hair from her eyes. ‘Cause of death? Anaphylactic reaction to ‘substances unknown’. But it was that scarf I tell you!’

‘I see.’ I closed my eyes, ran my fingers through my own hair, then consulted my notes. I had three – Liability? George Wood? Dead? Not much to go on. ‘So, how would you say that relates to the topic of ‘being a woman’?’

‘Well isn’t it obvious?’

‘Uh...yes, perhaps. I mean, I should have it in your own words really.’

She regarded me wearily. ‘A vain woman must never be cheap!’ she barked abruptly.

‘Beauty comes at a price. One must be willing to pay it. Glamour is not a part-time thing – it’s a lifestyle. Just look at my face! You think it lifted itself?’

“I suppose n-”

‘The modern woman is still a traditional woman. As a girl, the world sees her and calls her ‘potential’, a lump of clay.’ She gestured flamboyantly. ‘Everything she does after that makes her more attractive, expensive, every day is another movement of the sculptor’s hand. She is starved to bones, cut, pierced, plucked, and polished until she is Michelangelo’s ‘The Geisha’, wielding a fan of dollar bills. And some stale little Italian gets all the credit. And why?’ she laughed her hoarse cackle, then leaning forward, diamonds riding her knuckles, she says ‘because a beautiful woman is not a woman at all. She *is* beauty. And beauty is an article of trade.’ She leant back, looking away. ‘But better to be a commodity,’ slowly and seemingly to herself now, ‘better to be bought and sold, to pay and be paid for, than to live a quiet life. To die, or to have babies and die. To be nothing at all.’

‘Call me an optimist,’ I said, interrupting her reverie, ‘but I’d like to think modern women have more choices than that.’

‘Not all women,’ she said dryly, ‘not all.’

① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

Reagan joined us shortly after, strutting to the pool for her morning swim. She regarded us both like lazy lifeguards sunning ourselves black.

‘Have you been in already?’ she barked across the glittering surface.

‘I just ate,’ I called.

‘What?’

‘Cramp,’ I replied, making a stupid motion at my side. ‘I shouldn’t swim yet.’ Though I clearly meant ever, in her unnerving presence. She had chosen to don a particularly disturbing string bikini.

‘That is a stunning Chanel,’ Margaret suddenly roared at my side, ‘I saw it modeled in Paris not a month ago!’

‘You were at that show?’ Reagan beamed.

‘Oh yes,’ Margaret nodded sagely, ‘but alas, they did not have my size.’

I wasn’t sure what was more sinister, the fact that I was witnessing a child wearing it, or the fact that it *fit* a child. I made a mental note to quiz Margaret on what exactly models ate, or rather didn’t eat, later. Either way I suspected any adult getting in the pool with her wearing *that* would be put on some kind of register.

‘See? Better to have cramp,’ Reagan crowed, adjusting a pair of bubblegum goggles over her eyes, ‘than Dunlap Syndrome.’ With that she swan dived into the pool, hardly making a splash.

‘Don-?’

‘Fat, dear,’ Margaret frowned.

‘Oh.’

We sat poolside for almost an hour, watching Reagan mermaid her way up and down, offering the odd insight into pro-technique as she passed.

‘She swims well,’ Margaret nodded to me after a while, ‘I used to swim twice a day.’

‘What made you stop?’

‘Who said anything about stopping?’ she said with a cackle. ‘I’m old! Now I swim *three* times a day - otherwise my patootie would be hanging lower than my ankles.’

‘Lovely.’ I rubbed my head. ‘Shouldn’t you be in there too then?’

‘And what? Give the poor child a nasty turn?’ she said, ‘no girl should see what she’s destined to look like in half a century! Swimming is a private affair at my age. Unless you count my pool boy. But he doesn’t speak English – so the secret dies with him.’ She smiled to herself and lowered her voice into mischief. ‘Still, I don’t see why a young thing like you isn’t diving in – go splash the little madam!’

‘I’m fine. Not a fan of chlorine.’

‘Suit yourself dear. Well I’m heading in for iced tea and a phone call. My new PA should be at the auction house by now – they have the most wonderful Eams chair that that CEO used to own. The dead one, oh what’s his name?’

‘Sorry.’

‘Well either way, there’s a rumor that he slumped into it after the pills so it’s something of a designer curio now!’

‘Going, going, gone!’ I said, watching her scurry into the house. I let my pad fall wearily from my lap, the pen escaping from me, barrel-rolling itself along the tiles and into the pool with a plop. I sighed and sat back in my chair. This was going nowhere.

‘Dropped something?’ Reagan’s dripping face had appeared, bobbing at the side, still goggled like a horsefly.

‘My pen,’ I said, ‘it’s okay though I-’ But she had already dived under to get it.

‘Here!’ she said wiping her face with a hand, proffering the wet pen with the other, ‘it’s probably ruined you know,’ she stated, frowning as I took it.

‘Oh dear,’ I said flatly.

‘Still - it looks cheap.’

‘Hm?’

‘The pen – free was it? *I* won’t sign with anything cheaper than a Caran d’Ache. My agent says it’s bad form. With big hands like yours you should probably be using a Faber-Castell. Perhaps something custom made. I think a-’

I was suddenly reminded of Margaret’s words. “If only she hadn’t been so *cheap*.” They echoed around my brain, worryingly. I stared at the pen like it might impale me at any moment.

‘Oh, I *see*.’ Reagan said suddenly, rolling her eyes - ‘Fine! Don’t worry, I’m coming!’ she sighed, heaving her tiny self from the pool.

‘What?’

‘Oh come on!’ she wrestled the goggles from her eyes, revealing where they had left pink rings around them. ‘Hanging about all morning? Oh *oops my nasty pen rolled into the pool Reagan! Clumsy me! Will you get it for me?*’ She tossed back her wet ponytail, then squeezing water from her miniature eyebrows she laughed, ‘if you wanted to interview me why didn’t you just say? We’re *both* grownups for goodness sake.’

① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

I could see there would be no stopping her now. She was firmly wearing the determined little brow children wear when they think they're giving you exactly what you want – whether you like it or not. It was the face I used to pull when I pushed the shopping cart for my mother. Usually into a wall.

'I knew you'd be getting to me sooner or later,' Reagan was saying, 'I saw you talking to Mags, but I knew who you were *really* after.'

'You got me,' I replied indulgently.

'So,' she pulled the towel around her tiny shoulders, perching on the edge of the sun chair, 'what do you want to know?'

'Well the topic is,' I said and winced, 'thoughts on being a woman.'

'Oh that's easy!' she laughed, tossing her damp ponytail. She crossed her legs, placing her little hands on the knee. 'I think it's just great,' she said simply. I nodded encouragingly.

'Oh!' she laughed, 'yes, you can quote me on that.'

Smiling thinly, 'could you give me an example?'

'Sure,' she said brightly, 'cheaper car insurance.'

'Perhaps something more personal?' I could feel parts of my brain dying off. 'I mean, something from your life, a source of feminine inspiration perhaps?'

'Oh okay.' She thought for a moment. 'Well how about my mom? She's the best dental hygienist in California. She won the Gold Tooth at the Private Dentistry Awards.'

'Right.' The pen dribbled chlorine across a blank page. 'And that was her, um, greatest achievement?'

‘That and she treated Carey Bartov’s gingivitis like a month before he died. She has a signed picture of him in her office. Apparently it’s worth more than the *whole* practice.’

‘Uh huh...So what would you say is the key to her success? Why is *she* at the top?’

‘Oh, she has OCD.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Obsessive compulsive disorder? Duh!’ We blinked at each other. Reagan sighed.

‘Basically she wears gloves like *all* the time. Even when she sleeps. She just *really* hates germs. One time a stray cat got into our basement and died so we had to stay at a hotel while the whole house was fumigated. It was a great hotel though – good spa. So anyway that’s her slogan - *cleanest hands in California.*’

‘So she *never* takes them off? Not even to, I don’t know, eat?’

‘Never. She only takes them off to put on a new pair.’ Reagan shrugged, ‘you get used to it. I’ve never really seen her without them. It’s like she says “hygiene is a full time job and someone’s got to do it.”’

‘So if she hugs you or someth-’

‘Oh she doesn’t hug. She says you can catch scabies from hugs.’

‘So she’s never...’, I felt dazed. This was absurd, yet Reagan had such a matter-of-fact way of saying things, as though they were happening far away in some distant Third World country where sadness solved nothing, and resilience everything.

‘Actually she *did* hold me right after I was born,’ said Reagan, ‘she said we still had the same germs then. And even if we didn’t, she said mothers should always hold their babies after they’re born. I guess that was the only time she touched me *properly.*’

‘That’s so sad,’ I said. ‘You must-’

‘Not really!’ she interrupted. ‘She held me even though she’s totally crazy paranoid about germs. I think that’s pretty amazing. It would be like making yourself pick up a big ugly spider, or a fake Prada bag!’

‘I suppose that’s one way of looking at it,’ I said uncertainly.

‘Well she used to drink a lot to cope with it – that’s how she got pregnant,’ she dismissed the bombshell with a flick of her little head, ‘but when she found out I was coming she gave it *right* up. She didn’t even go to rehab! Just cold turkey,’ she smiled as though she were a middle-aged socialite recounting her glory days, ‘then she went back to school to get a job where she could still wear her gloves, worked hard, and voila!’ she smiled, ‘- here we are. She *totally* took charge because of me.’

‘Guess we know where you get your determination,’ I said. ‘Can’t be easy doing nine seasons.’

‘I became a star at four!’ she stated airily. ‘Not just anyone could do *that*. But like you said, my mom gave me determination. Or rather, *I* gave her determination and she just returned it.’

‘Uhuh,’ I said, rubbing my temple. ‘So what would you say she has taught you about women?’

‘We just deal, you know? We can handle anything. Boys are kinda blah - most of them are *so* immature.’ She sat back, pleased. ‘It’s like my agent Carla, she’s really fat. Like,’ she indicated a colossus size with her arms, ‘*super* fat! Guys in school were incredibly rude about it and made her feel bad. But she has so much money now they can’t even say anything. She gets to hang out with stars like me while those guys who used to make fun of her are losers who work at the Wendys window. When we stop for soda there she’s all “large and *in charge!*”’ she



motioned soberly with her hand. I tried not to laugh. ‘Sure she’s fat but she’s totally smart. Like Margaret is old but she still goes to Paris fashion week. And my mom hates germs but still cured Carey Bartov’s gingivitis. We don’t let losers and drama get in our way. We figure stuff out.’

‘Only women do that?’

‘My mom says if women were in charge there wouldn’t be *any* wars - just a lot of time outs. Boys don’t like to talk. They like to hit things and set them on fire for no reason. That’s why my parents got divorced.’ She pulled the towel up around her, for a moment looking like any other little girl sitting by a pool. ‘I don’t understand them.’ And then calmly, ‘I don’t want to.’

I put my notebook down, suddenly feeling cold. There was something cheerless about a child talking this way. Was this the disillusionment of stardom? Or simply truths, realized too soon?

‘Do a lot of girls your age feel that way?’ I asked.

‘I’m not a girl,’ she said frankly, ‘I’m a woman. I’ve had periods for over a year.’

‘Oh,’ I said. I cleared my throat, ‘sorry, do a lot of *women* you’re age feel that way?’

‘You start out curious,’ she said, ‘then disappointed, then bored. It’s a pattern you learn to see in scripts. Like in season seven Bailey’s older sister dates Jackson, Freddie, and then Kit. They all cheat on her. Come season eight she’s dated Corey, Stenson, Ben, Skye, and Taylor.’ She counted them carefully on her fingers. ‘And they *all* totally lie to her. By the final season she’s engaged to Troy who leaves her at the altar because he’s “afraid of commitment”. She then finds Marc, who gets drunk and smashes his bike, causing a car wreck that kills a whole family. Finally she meets Darren who cheats on her too, but dies of a tumor before she can confront him. See? And between each romance the writers made *all* characters have “emotional amnesia”

where everyone had to pretend the other stuff didn't happen and "this new guy is totally fresh and different and we're all totally excited about him!" It was *so* dumb pretending this one was going to be "the one" for fans or magazines or whatever, when like the whole cast knew he would make a drama then get replaced with another jerk. Guess I just started noticing the same pattern in real life too.'

'Wow.' What had this series done to her? Or was her worldview, the view portrayed in dramas, in the media, the truer depiction of human relationships? Had media become a true reflection of life? Or life a truer reflection of media? I was dizzied by these prospects. And I could sense myself grasping, for dependable memories and reliable circumstances where she was wrong. I wanted names; I wanted people who broke these accusations. My mind scrolled couples of my past and present – neighbors, family, friends. They all betrayed me in various ways. Especially the Dawsons who I thought were a sure thing until I remembered how Mr. Dawson was a convicted pedophile. In my mind this was grounds for divorce, even if Mrs. Dawson hadn't thought so. I mentally nullified their marriage. So who *had* made it work? There had to have been some. On Earth. But where did they live? And why had we not met? Or perhaps their happiness was so unremarkable, so gray; I had failed to even regard it. The same way I had apparently failed to regard the deterioration of every heterosexual romantic relationship I had heard of to date. No, that couldn't be right. I mean I-

'Gosh, you're *so* sensitive!' Reagan interrupted loudly, 'don't you watch Jerry Springer? Forget about it. It's just part of being an actress like me. Doesn't stop me wanting a family one day. When I'm older I'm going to be a mom and have like six kids.'

'Six?'

'Sure,' she said resolutely, 'so my mom can hold them all.'

# ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

I lay on my oiled front, cheeks pressed into the leather kidneys of a massage chair. The renowned masseuse, Lien Chu, was working her fingertip magic into the cricks of my poor writer's back. Saturday was our house's spa day and I intended to take full advantage – and frankly, I needed to. As Lien rubbed, I listened to the others sigh and talk. On my left, Ashley had opted for a hot stone treatment and last I looked, had resembled a Botticelli Venus trapped under a small avalanche. Next to her, Reagan was having a facial. I had enjoyed the artistic irony of her little face being painted white like a porcelain theatre mask, watching it frown deeply and bark “scalp massage” when the esthetician looked like she might be leaving. That mask probably suited her more than it should.

Across the tiled room, through the spirals of sandalwood and steam, I'd just been able to make out Fei Yen and Margaret, either side of a giant floor palm. Margaret had been throned in a high pedicure chair – an odd thing which looked like the lovechild of a designer couch and a toilet. From said elevation, she had spent over half an hour scrutinizing and critiquing the nail colours, insisting the “porcelain” was in fact, “unmistakably shell” and their “marshmallow” was, “more like picket fence”. She finally decided on alabaster but demanded it was mixed with three parts pearl so it didn't look “cheap”. The manicurist had said she would “look into it” and rather saintly resisted smacking her over the head with the leather options book. To the left of her majesty, Fei Yen lay covered in mud and seaweed from the neck down.

‘Nothing but a handkerchief on her patootie!’ Margaret was chuckling at her. ‘My mother wouldn't have believed her eyes! Girls today have no shame - and that's how it should be. We're all born naked!’ She paused to address the girl filing her toenails, ‘you'll have to do it harder

than *that* dear, they're hard as tortoise shells. Harder, harder! Don't be shy dear, you're mother wasn't.' And I was suddenly reminded of my own mother.

'This stuff smells bad,' I heard Fei Yen complain, 'Like bad Yúshēng.'

'That'll be the kelp dear,' Margaret snapped. 'Let it do its work.'

'Kelp?' Fei Yen shrieked, 'it is fish?'

'Good for the system,' Margaret remarked dismissively.

Fei Yen said something sharp to Lien in Chinese. 'Yes,' Lien replied above me, 'and algae to hydrate and detoxify.'

'Zhēn tāoyàn!' Fei Yen cried at her. 'It better make me glow.'

'Isn't that what money's for?' Ashley interrupted next to me. 'So shut up and enjoy it already.'

Fei Yen snorted, remarking to Lien, 'Zǒngshì chuán xiánhuà, gōurě máodùn.'

Lien sighed, suddenly running her hands painfully deep into my spine - 'Wǒmen shì yí gè dài jiā tíng,' she remarked thoughtfully, 'zuì tāoyàn de jiù shì yǒu rén zài zhè lǐ lā bāng jié pài yǐng xiǎng tuán jié.'

'Wǒ zuì tāoyàn nà xiē ài zuò xiù de rén le,' I suddenly realized it was Margaret speaking now, lifting my head from the chair to be sure. 'Gǎn jué tā men tè bié xū wěi.' Margaret was saying coolly, 'and it is rude to speak in languages some may not understand.'

Lien laughed out loud. 'Zhè ge lǎo pó zi kě tāoyàn le!'

'I have my moments,' said Margaret. 'Never underestimate a senior citizen.'

‘So why weren’t you at the spa?’ I asked.

Sunday didn’t look up from her bible. ‘I was busy.’

‘Not for everyone I suppose.’

I had left the spa early, hoping to catch Sunday alone. I had got the distinct impression that she had been avoiding me since her unsuccessful crusade on Ashley and I the previous evening. I couldn’t help feeling sorry for her, probably because she was so visibly wasting away.

‘That’s not it,’ she said directly, still not looking up. ‘I’d just rather be doing something that makes me feel closer to god.’

‘Gotcha.’

‘Did you want to talk?’ she said suddenly. The book was abruptly snapped closed, manic hope flitting across her skull-like features. ‘Maybe about something I said last night?’ she coaxed.

I had been hovering over her skeleton like a vulture, circling the sunroom, hoping to snatch something and make off with it unnoticed. Get it over with. But it looked like I was actually going to have to interact; I was going to have to ask Judas to tell his benign little story. I was going to have to clench my teeth, sit my “patootie” down and just get what I needed. According to Reagan, this should be easy. I was a woman, I could “deal”.

‘Actually, it’s about this article I’m writing,’ I said uneasily, ‘I should really get your thoughts down.’

‘Oh,’ she said tersely, ‘I see.’

‘Would now be okay?’ She looked at me, ungiven. ‘It might be best, you know, while it’s still just us.’ That sounded wrong, provocative even. ‘Because it’s quiet, obviously.

Obviously so, it’s....quiet. Concentration.’ I cleared my throat.

‘Now would be fine,’ she frowned, very much like it wasn’t.

‘Great.’ I sat down next to her on the leather coach, casually drawing my notebook and pen from my back pocket like I always kept them there. I was a writer after all – it could happen.



‘I heard the topic was pretty open.’

‘Just your thoughts on being a woman, what it means to you, etc.’

She turned the bible in her hands, thinking. ‘I feel moved,’ she said after a moment, ‘to talk about a certain event in my life.’

‘Sounds good,’ I said, privately wondering about the toxicity level of holy homophobia I could endure before letting my cursed cheap pen impale itself in her leg.

‘Well everyone already knows about the road accident which led me to the right path, to god’s way. But right now god is telling me that I need to open up about another experience I had. Before that. It was when I was still...’ I nodded. ‘Tainted.’ I frowned. ‘I was tainted and it brought evil on myself. But I kept it a secret because I was ashamed. But I need to stop being ashamed. I’ve been saved now. The light of Jesus gives me the courage to talk about it...for the first time.

I wondered how unreasonable it would be to just flee the room now. This was the woman who, in the name of Jesus, had backed Proposition Eight. This was the woman who had, in the

name of Jesus, rebuked the actress Carrie Angelo's wedding to Jessica Ferraro, *during* their private ceremony armed with Leviticus and a holier-than-thou megaphone. What fresh hell was she about to unleash on me and my notebook?

'I was raped.'

'Oh.' It fell out of my mouth like an anvil.

'It was while I was touring Europe. We'd gone to a club... heavily intoxicated, not thinking straight...' She was going to tell me all of it. Oh god. 'I'd taken some pills; my friends had mixed a lot of bad drinks. We were already...wrong... when we arrived. But we carried on drinking anyway. *For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction...*' She looked dazed, as though someone had struck her.

'We don't have to-'

'I want to!' she said sharply, 'I want this. *God* wants this. *The truth shall set you free...*'

'Yes but the topic-'

'I'm getting to that!'

I fell silent. It looked like there was no escape. Where are you Ashley?

'So we carried on drinking that poison, losing ourselves more and more. I don't remember much. I had taken a camera; we had been taking pictures all night. I had it around my neck. I recall someone grabbing it, taking pictures of us dancing. Then this guy must have tried to leave with it because I remember following him. Into the bathroom. I remember screaming at him to give it back but he just laughed. There were men in there. I remember faces...laughing. I remember the music was so loud but I could hear the... And they covered my mouth...' Her voice wavered, but her eyes were fixed. Fixed on something faraway, a place, she was forcing

herself to look at again. ‘But I can forgive...I can forgive that. *Them*. It’s what I did... that was wrong.’

‘How?’ I said incredulously, ‘that’s unforgiveable. Still, what I really can’t see is how *you* did anything wrong.’

‘They must have thought that’s what I wanted.’ She shook her head, ‘I was dressed like a whore. I was drunk. I’d gone in. I was *a whore*. My music, my lyrics... it makes me sick to think of them now.’

I stared at her, this hollowed shell, and was immediately reminded of something I had read once. Something about the flavor of lies...I tasted it. I was starting to see what had gutted her, hollowed her into this collection of bibles and bones. I had just been force-fed something that had been rotting in our society for over two thousand years. It was the same discouraging sensation present whenever people “discussed” rape. Why *is* there a discussion? She had been “asking for it”, “she had it coming”, “she was *that sort* of girl”. What did these phrases mean? Aside from being sensational excuses. Until that moment I hadn’t properly considered the possibility that, to some, my behavior could fully justify crimes against me, or conversely the behavior of others could imply their liability to whatever crime I cared to dish out. Sunday was someone who believed this to be truth, someone who still believed in harlots and seducers. This was someone who could sit on a jury.

‘You didn’t consent,’ I said firmly, ‘what they did was wrong and you should have gone to the police.’

‘You don’t get it,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘I consented every day with my clothes, my behavior, my music.’



‘Is that what you *really* think?’ I said impatiently, ‘rape is okay if you wear certain clothes? I’m not writing this shit!’

She flinched at the word like I had taken a swing at her. ‘It’s the truth!’ she said. ‘And what I did after – well I know only Jesus could forgive me.’

‘You mean not going to the police?’ I said sourly.

‘I aborted the child.’

‘Look,’ I threw my hands up, ‘I don’t think I really want to write *any* of this.’ For some reason I had immediately had enough of her, of the entire conversation. ‘Let me guess? You think you should have gone through with having your *rapist’s* baby and maybe even thanked him for punishing your whorish ways?’

‘But-’

‘You probably think abortion is totally wrong because it kills the *magical* essence of life,’ I was yelling now, ‘well don’t forget to guilt trip women about having their period every month too, *Mother Mary*, because when you think about it, that’s one great big evil semi-abortion too! Not that your god would know anything about that, I mean aside from authoring the biggest misogynistic work of fiction,’ she stood up; I stood up, ‘in history! He and his categorically *male* henchman have done nothing but give women a hard time since Eve. And if you think I’m going to get another of his woman-bashing, god-hailing sermons written you’re wrong!’ She suddenly grabbed me, pushing her lips to mine. I struggled free, ‘What the hell are you doing? You’re crazy!’

‘I’m sorry I-’

‘Well, well, well,’ Ashley was in the archway, as if transported back to it from our first meeting. ‘Look who’s come back to the dark side.’

I looked from Ashley's satisfied smile, to Sunday's trembling stare, now directed at the bible. I couldn't deal. In fact I found myself pushing past Ashley, jogging oddly up the stairs, slamming the door of my room like a riled teenager. And I stood staring at the finite barrier between me and what had just happened, breathing, with Ashley's laughter echoing through the house.



The smell of the BBQ rose quickly through the building. My stomach groaned. I'd been resisting the churns and moans, not wanting to go down and face the infamous staring which follows all, as Reagan put it, "drama". I'd taken to lying on the bed again, having prized another random book from the shelf. This one had turned out to be slightly more profound than pig weaning - Søren Kierkegaard's 'The Concept of Anxiety'. Had I not still been in the mind to impale Sunday with stationery, I might have leant it to her. Religious philosophy did seem to be the order of the day in any case. That and hotdogs. Or is that burgers? Either way, fried onions were involved. My stomach made a strangled noise, swearing retribution. I couldn't hold out much longer. Why had I got so annoyed with Sunday anyway? Had I just completely overreacted? After all she was only one more troglodyte type, a crusty ambassador for a long dead race, wielding primitive sticks and stones at the inevitable face of change. If she wanted to follow a two thousand year-old survival guide that was her business. And yet I couldn't shake my irritation. It's not like she was genuine either; what was that sexual assault business about? I recalled something my tactless mother had said once regarding a dog that used to live next door. "Keep a dog tied up all day and sooner or later it'll turn *mean*." A week later it had tried to "savage" her as she went to return some mail. Though her bag was the only casualty, savaged

between collisions with the poor dog's head, she considered this proof of her theory about things on short leashes. Perhaps I was lucky Sunday had not bitten off my "tainted" arms like gingerbread.

There was a knock at the door.

'Christine?'

It was Ashley. 'Yes?' I said reluctantly.

'Are you joining us for dinner?' she asked through the door.

I resisted the temptation to shout back that I wasn't hungry; I had probably regressed into childhood enough for one day. 'Yeh, sure,' I called begrudgingly, 'I'll be down in a minute.'

When I opened the door a few moments later, I was surprised to find her standing there waiting. She was wearing a red cocktail dress which accentuated her hair. I was instantly uncomfortable. 'Oh, hi. I didn't know you were waiting. I'd have...' I struggled for an excuse aside from being in no hurry to rejoin the group, 'I'd have spent less time fixing myself.' I sensed her large eyes running over the scribble of untamed hair.

'That's alright,' she said, with a knowing smile. 'I was just worried that I'd embarrassed you earlier. You know, *earlier*.'

Straight to it then. 'I wasn't embarrassed!' I said too quickly. 'Forget about it.'

'Good,' she said, linking her arm in mine as we walked, 'because if you and Sunday want to, whatever, then it's not any of my business per se.'

'What?' I said, 'it is! I mean we're not! What you saw was-' I regarded her expression.

'Yes well, *ha ha*.'

'You are oddly sensitive,' she grinned, 'and you wonder why I make fun.'

‘I don’t know why she did that,’ I insisted. ‘But it’s probably best that we don’t bring it up in front of the others. I think she’s unstable enough as it is. The problem will be writing something that doesn’t make her sound that way.’

‘That’s *her* problem,’ she said calmly. ‘Perhaps we could meet after dinner to talk about what you’re going to write about me.’

‘Sure,’ I said, distracted that our arms were touching. I was concentrating on not sweating or smelling or shaking. ‘That would be fine.’

‘Have you thought about what you’re going to say about yourself?’

‘Hm?’

‘Your own thoughts on being a woman?’

‘Oh,’ I had a sinking feeling, followed by a drowning one. ‘I hadn’t actually given much thought to that. I guess I’d forgotten I had to say stuff too.’

‘You’ll think of something,’ she said. ‘And if you don’t you could always use the sensational verbal attack from this afternoon.’

‘Thanks.’

‘See?’ she laughed, ‘*sensitive*. If you do use it, just know the Vatican’s missiles will be pointing at your house.’

‘The Vatican own missiles?’

‘Worse,’ she said, ‘they own the people who own the missiles.’

# ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

In terms of damage control, the BBQ was a moderate success. Quite a few notable women from the neighboring sisterhoods dropped by for ‘exotic’ themed gourmet meats and salads, so it was easy to avoid any aftermath of Sunday’s episode. I had mingled for a while, a stick of cantaloupe and cinnamon king prawns in my hand, remembering simpler times with simpler BBQ food.

The buxom celebrity chef Rosa Walker was making a guest appearance behind the colossus of steel which was the poolside BBQ. As a result of her machinations we were being subjected to apple and tofu in our sausages, blue cheese chicken wings, and a buffet table of six different salads most of which were crab or spinach-based. Smell can be a deceptive sense. Yet there she stood, rotundly lording it up in her signature “I heart hotdogs” apron, oblivious. At least the presence of food, edible or not, was enough to keep Sunday scarce. There would be no more of her enlightening philosophies on abortion or rape tonight. Sunday and her primitive ideas better stay out of my way I thought, bending discreetly to hide my ‘exotic’ shish kebab in the folds of a nearby Yucca. It was already holding three.

‘Oh Christine,’ Reagan said, making me jump back up, ‘how can you stand it? They taste like fishy Churros. Rosa did me one without the cinnamon but it’s like I told her – I *don’t* like seafood. This thing is gross too,’ she handed me a half-eaten hotdog before I could protest, just slapping it in my palm like a dollar bill, ‘I put ketchup on it but it didn’t help. Seriously, you must be the only person here eating this stuff.’

‘Oh?’ I said witheringly, ‘lucky me.’

‘I mean I *get* it. The theme thing is good and looks okay I suppose. But everyone knows you’re not meant to actually *eat* fancy food. It’s like wine tasting – sip and spit!’ She nodded her head, knowledgeably. ‘They should have put a bucket out for us.’

How a twelve-year-old knew about wine tasting eluded me, thankfully Ashley was there to save me once again. She breezed over from talking to Margaret and another elderly woman, smirking at my predicament - dinner at the children’s table.

‘Shall we talk now? Or,’ her eyes moved from my drooping kebab to the dripping hotdog in my palm, ‘when you’re done eating?’

‘I know right?’ said Reagan, ‘how can she like it? She must have *no* taste buds.’

‘Now would be fine. I’ll...finish this on the way.’

As we made for the house, Reagan called after us. ‘Oh. And Christine? Before I forget, did you know Mel Pier is doing a reading tomorrow?’

‘*Of course!*’ I said over my shoulder, clenching the hotdog.

‘So why didn’t you tell me?’



‘It all started,’ said Ashley, ‘with a kiss.’

‘And you became a porn star?’

‘If only!’ she said. We were opposite each other in my room, me in the chair, her perched like a pin-up on the edge of the bed. ‘It’s more the principle. I was eight years old in a miserable boarding school and Leopold Hoffmann gave me three red gummy bears to kiss him on the

mouth. That was when I first learnt how I could get things I wanted. I always had nice feminine features – the rest just worked itself out.’

‘Interesting,’ I said, regarding the floor, ‘Fei Yen used sex to survive in China. But you used it to-’

‘To survive. Mostly my parents - they didn’t like to give me anything I asked for. Papa spent his money on drink, Mother put hers into the church’s offering plate every Sunday, but both agreed that anything *I* wanted was a waste of time. Their way of keeping me out of the way was by keeping me in that school. And there, nothing was mine, only *this*.’ She ran her hands down her smooth frame. ‘I may get paid more than gummy bears nowadays but the deal’s still the same. Survival.’

‘Some people just get a job at K-Mart,’ I said.

‘K-Mart didn’t pay enough for what I had in mind.’ She smiled, smoothing her long red hair to one side. ‘What I needed carried a much heavier price tag.’

‘Expensive taste?’

‘You could say that. No, I had something very specific in mind. Something big. Like I said – this was survival. A certain mistake had been made that needed to be... rectified.’

‘Jesus,’ I laughed, ‘it sounds like you had a guy killed.’

‘Well...’

‘You’re not serious?’

‘Before I say anything else, I think you should know I’m retiring from the game. Hanging up my thong and boots, if you like. Sort of hoping you can help me out.’

‘How?’ I asked, confused. The conversation had suddenly taken on a strange air like Ashley were Fat Tony and I needed to kiss her signet ring and swear allegiance before we went on any further.

‘Look, this piece you’re writing about me, make it good okay? And I don’t know what the others have given you but – well, guessing from what I saw of Sunday’s it’s pretty out-there stuff. So here’s hoping mine isn’t going to come off as a thunder snatcher. So here’s the deal; now that I’m retiring, I’ve got my agent off my back, enough money to roll in – well, who cares? I’m ready to put the record straight.’

‘Yes, but the topic-’

‘It fits in with it. Promise.’ She winked. Damn.

‘Okay, well as long as it’s nothing too – well just as long as I can link it in with the topic of being a woman, then sure. Whatever.’ *Dear god, please don’t let her say anything that will shatter both my affections and my ability to write a single digit of this article. Amen.*

‘Well, okay. She let out a deep breath. ‘Truth is I know a lot about being a woman. I guess in some ways you could say I’ve made my career out of being one – cashing in on what *some* people believe to be their natural purpose. Sex. In school I was fascinated by biology, especially how males and females of different species differed, how they interacted. Gender was everything, it seemed to define the life you would one day lead, one way or another. I wanted to understand why. What it would mean for me. Yeh?’

‘It is pretty interesting,’ I shrugged, ‘I wrote an article on interlocus sexual conflict once. It wasn’t very popular...’ I shifted uncomfortably.

‘Inter-?’



‘Interlocus sexual conflict. Males in most species rape, murder, harass,’ I counted them on my fingers, ‘basically endanger the lives and wellbeing of females, as well as their young, in order to further their own interest to mate. It creates a paradoxical conflict which, if left unchecked, doesn’t act to further the species at all.’ *Geek*.

‘Oh yes, I know about that,’ she said immediately, surprising me. ‘My best friend in school had a kitten called Hopscotch and we were never allowed to take her outside in case local toms fucked her,’ I winced, ‘it can kill them when they’re young you know. But one must have got in their house somehow though because she ended up having kittens before she was even one. *We* thought it was great – we’d already got names ready. I think I was going to call mine Kurt, after Kurt Cobain, ha! Of course my parents said I couldn’t have it - tight-fisted bastards. It would never have happened anyway though. Not long after they were born, a tom got in the garage window and shook all the babies to death. My friend’s brother caught him in the act and shot it dead with his BB gun. Little Hopscotch was heartbroken; she kept carrying socks about in her mouth and putting them in her bed like babies. Apparently toms do that all the time though – kill the kittens I mean - brings the mother back into heat sooner.’

‘Lovely,’ I said.

‘Don’t write that down,’ Ashley laughed, ‘not exactly nice is it?’

‘It doesn’t have to be nice to be true.’

‘So I’m guessing there was nothing “nice” in your article then?’ she asked. ‘If it was full of stories like that, no wonder it wasn’t popular.’

‘No greater insult than the truth, but no greater instrument of fairness.’

‘Hm?’

‘Something my mother used to say.’ Perhaps she had taught me something useful after all. ‘But I guess you’re right, there probably wasn’t much *nice* to say about interlocus sexual conflict. Funny though, they would call it sexist or feminist to even study it in humans. The parallels in behavior are striking though...well I don’t know that men shake babies- well they do but. Hm - still, some of the ways females have adapted to survive said horrors can be interesting.’

‘Like sexual mimicry?’

‘Yes, exactly,’ I said, surprised again. ‘Weren’t kidding about those biology books.’

‘Oh yes,’ she said, ‘females mimicking males, and vice versa, in order to “defend against the violence of male behavior.” Doing drag basically, in order to survive.’

‘Again it makes you wonder about human behavior in that area,’ I said, thoughtfully.

‘It does. Imagine what it must be like to be a boy, looking at men and not wanting to grow up to be like a single one of them.’

‘Yes... imagine.’ I looked at her sideways.

‘Just following your cock about all day just like toms, leaving death and destruction behind wherever you’ve been busy. No thanks.’ Her eyes gravitated to mine. ‘To be male is to belong to everything that’s ugly in this world. It’s to be the problem, not the answer.’

‘What is the answer?’

‘What is the question?’

‘Where does biological determinism end?’ I could feel a kind of white noise beginning to increase in the back of my brain, the noise of ugly equations being unscrambled, sorted, solved, ‘and we begin? Perhaps we do not begin at all. Darwin had it right. We are actors with

scripts... and we know each other's lines. But we're pretending not to.' *It sounds like you had a guy killed....Well...*

'Maybe not the lines, but definitely the play. What's worse than being fated to kill your father and marry your mother? Worse than being born an Oedipus?' she said, eyes blinking into mine. 'To know it from the beginning, to know your fate.' She looked away with an intrepid laugh. 'History is the oracle. It was mine at least. History, science – every book I cared to open, every account, every friend, every family member. They just reminded me, enforced every suspicion, my inevitable fate. I believe man *was* made in god's image – the image of dictators, executioners, the masters of genocide. Woman on the other hand...'

'Sugar, spice, and everything nice?' I rolled my eyes. 'Not all of them are so peachy either.' I thought immediately of Reagan.

'If man is an error, god is *the* error. He invented both mass creation and mass destruction but put death's apprentices in charge of everything. With death in charge, is it any wonder life stinks for women?'

'Touché,' I said. 'But I always fancied Christianity as a metaphor for Darwinism.' *Enter geek mode.* 'I suppose Darwinism might suggest that putting males in charge of mating selection would indeed pose a problem. Their own will to mate would supersede their awareness that their genes often aren't worth passing on – something females would see immediately. It would certainly explain the prevalence of certain...undesirable human qualities.' But this time I wasn't thinking of Reagan, I was thinking of someone a little closer; I mean literally. You could say my Darwinian spider senses were suddenly tingling to a familiar sensation. Fee Fi Fo Fum I smell the blood of a... 'So Oedipus,' I said, 'to the truth then- I'm no Tiresias but I'm sensing yours is

going to be a bit more controversial than a lecture on natural selection. Especially for your loyal fans.'

'Oh I expect it will be,' she smiled. 'But I plan to stay here.'

'In Genoveva?'

'I'll make a big donation...I can't really leave after you've written this. I expect things will get heated after -'

'You can't be serious. Stay here? What makes you think you'll be welcome when they find out the truth? When they find out what I think you're implying, and what I think you must know I think you're implying, I think, or-' I shook my head, 'let's just come out and say it – *you're a man!*'

'No I'm not!' she leapt to her feet like I'd spat at her. 'I'm just as much a woman as anyone else here and I have \$50,000 dollars of surgery down there to prove it!'

'I don't think they'll see it that way,' I said flatly.

'Is that how you see it Christine?' she said suddenly, 'I've seen the way you look at me. And I know how I look at you.'

'Are you seeing how I'm looking at you now? You lied to me. My god, you lied your way in *here* of all places. This is a retreat for *women!* What were you thinking?'

'*I am* a woman. And proof of that should be what's between us, Christine. Don't pretend there isn't. You feel it. There's something there.'

'*Was,*' I said tersely. 'I never lied about anything, including my sexuality. G-A-Y.'

'Me too,' she shrugged, steadily becoming more wild eyed; '*I'm* gay too.'

‘Whether you can accept it or not, if you were born male, you *are* male – that makes you straight!’ I said impatiently. ‘You had no right to come to Genoveva. I can’t pretend I feel any different. I’m sorry.’ I got up, folding my arms. *Commence defensive body posturing...*

‘So let me get this straight, you pretend to be this big feminist thinker,’ she paused at my snigger before going on, ‘but you still think it’s what’s between my legs that defines me? Nice Christine!’

‘Actually,’ I said hotly, ‘it’s what’s between your ears that I have a problem with. We could go into limbic size or orbitofrontal to amygdale ratio but for now I’ll just go with arrogant chauvinistic pig who really does think that it’s what’s between your legs that define you – and you’ve got *\$50,000 dollars of surgery down there to prove it!* You’ve lied and deceived your way into this place. A place women have clearly tried to keep for themselves! What gives you the right to lie to everyone here? To *me*? You don’t know the first thing about being a woman. Get out!’

‘So you’re just going to write me off because of some biological stuff?’

‘You know,’ I said looking him dead in the face, there was suddenly nothing intimidating about him at all, ‘that’s *exactly* what I’m going to do.’ I got up and crossed the room, feeling the feeble heat of his glare. ‘You think you’ve escaped your terrible fate?’ I laughed, hand on the handle. ‘They have a name for you in the animal kingdom – a sneaker male, a mutation in a mate-guarding population. Cheaters, basically. Those who become rapists and female impersonators, the males who have no chance of mating otherwise. And trust me,’ I opened the door, ‘you haven’t a chance with me.’

‘I’m not an animal, Christine!’

‘If the shoe fits.’

He got up, stalking to the door like a sulking child, 'You're a bitch,' he said, but with little conviction.

'Jealousy,' I said, 'is an ugly emotion.'

'Are you going to tell them?'

'No,' I said, 'you are. You're going to go out and tell *everyone* the truth.'

'You're not being fair,' he said from the doorway, 'I haven't hurt anyone.'

'I believe *you* think that. Just following your cock about-'

'I don't ha-'

'Oh but you do,' I said, finger on temple, 'you removed the wrong organ.'

'Chris-'

'How else could you rationalize penetrating an all-women's retreat and then trying to seduce a lesbian!'

'I came here to tell you, to tell everyone.'

'Because it suited your purpose. You said it yourself; you've made your money, got what you wanted, found a place to run to and hide from any consequences. What a clever sneaker you've been. But just wait until the other males see what you've done.'

'That's not fair!'

'No greater insult than the truth, yet no greater instrument of fairness. My mother taught me that. What did your mother teach you?' And I closed the door on the last man I would ever see, speaking man's last word. 'Nothing.'

① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

‘When woe to man,’ Mel Pier warbled from the podium, ‘Lilith fled the garden, Traitor to He, When I became woman, I the second fruit, Man devoured me-’

‘Did you invite her?’ Reagan hissed.

‘*No!*’ I said impatiently.

‘When as the women, we return their apple,’ Mel Pier said, ‘*We* go free. When as womyn, allegiance is to us, our traitors flee.’

‘Psst! Do you have any gum?’

‘*No!*’

‘When we are wimmin, we are both fruit,’ she paused, ‘*and* the tree.’

There was a short peppering of applause. It had been an early start and I could still smell the coffee on most women’s’ breath. As the sweltering sunshine lifted itself into the sky, so we too had lifted ourselves from comfortable beds to wearily trudge into the gardens for the ceremony. Women had seemed to pour from every direction, all bronze breasts and legs pouring into the basin of chrysanthemums and white picket chairs, as though it were a meeting on Mount Olympus. Notable goddesses included the beautiful Barbara Cosmedes, fashion photographer and topless volleyball enthusiast, Carey Tendez the ruthless NYC lawyer who popularized the divorce anthem “don’t get mad – get half!”, as well as conjoined twin chess champions Sasha and Vera. Also in attendance were designers Mara Wilco, Stephanie LaVey, and Céline Perez, along with classic news anchor Tracy Heart, sporting her 70s bouffant like a silver vampire, situated immortal and unchangeable upon her scalp. As it happened, I had been graced with having the back of this creation as my official view of the ceremony.

‘I think it’s wearing Chanel No. 5!’ Reagan whispered loudly, pointing obviously at the hairpiece with one forefinger, whilst putting the other like a moustache beneath her nose. ‘It smells disgusting!’

‘Ai-yah!’ I heard Fei Yen exclaim behind me, ‘thought they only use that for embalming fluid.’

‘What’s embalming?’

‘*Shhh!*’

Mel Pier had stepped down from the small glass podium and had taken her seat back among the other women. Another woman now got up and moved behind the podium, one I did not recognize. Nevertheless she had the air of someone you *should* know, or someone you would not forget easily. She seemed to move with definite grace and purpose, a brisk sort of gliding in her alabaster kimono. As she reached the podium, she lifted her head, the elegant way a bird does from under its wing. It rose to reveal faded, floppy hair. There were dark eyes behind duct-taped glasses. An awkward sort of smile crept the conspiratorial mouth. I was watching myself, watching myself from the podium.

‘What the..?’

① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

‘After thousands of years of slavery, oppression, and unbridled cruelty some women in some countries are allowed some freedom,’ I was telling the audience from the podium. ‘This is not a comment on our efforts, rather a comment on the resilience of our oppressor’s unrelenting vice. Thousands of years, billions of lives later, and some women sometimes have their freedom.



Enough. Now is the time to turn our minds, our energies, to nurturing a new environment, a habitat hospitable to our kind. This is not war or violence or weapons or hate – this is solidarity, this is removing ourselves from the bloodthirsty tyrant’s land. Let him have his and let us, at long last, have ours.’ *Did I have a twin? A clone? An incredible stunt double?* ‘I have seen his grand houses, his limitless mansions, and I have asked but one thing – why is there not one room for us? And their answer? That we may have the floor when they are done with it – that is once it has been felled, poisoned, and all chance of life obliterated from it. And that is why Genoveva must stand. Not to challenge patriarchy or the world it has created. This is not a rebellion – this is a retreat, a removal of ourselves from the place we can no longer stand and no longer stand in.’ I, the *real* me, was looking at Reagan but she was listening to podium me, uncharacteristically enthralled. She didn’t seem fazed by the face stealer – no one did. ‘If they choose to chase us into the wilderness like pharaohs after their slaves,’ it was saying, ‘then together we shall form the peaceful wall that keeps their hostilities at bay. The will of every woman is a brick in this wall. Our Genoveva is but the little room we have salvaged from the wreckage of a mansion, where we own nothing, not even ourselves. Therefore this room, no matter how tiny, is at least one room of our own. And for us that makes it the most valuable room of all.’

‘What the hell is this?’ I said, jumping to my feet. This whole thing was turning Stepford Wives. ‘Who the hell are you?’ I shouted. ‘What is...what have you done with my, *my face?*’

‘Do you mind?’ Reagan said, ‘you were in the middle of saying something almost interesting.’

‘I was wha..?’ I pressed my palms to my head, what was this? Television? Reality TV?! No. This was too...under my skin. Pictures. The car rolling into Roswell. My mother looking at her wristwatch saying “biological o’clock dear!” Dead Koi on the surface of a pond. Anxiety.

*'Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate.'* Echoes of my grandmother prickling my neck. And sudden flashes of *them*. Oppressors. Betrayers. Judas not touching his meal. My father holding me with the expression of a bomb diffuser who has forgot his training. A boy with his tongue in the corner of his mouth – concentrating, trying to unhook a bra. Tom, Dick, Harry. Rinse & Repeat. Breastless chests ragged and puffed like stripped chickens. Little scrutinizing eyes – autopilot sorting machines, 'fuckable', 'non-fuckable', 'fuckable'... Wars, squabbles, scabbed knees and petty violence. My earth, my air, my water - I SAW IT FIRST. Currency. Consume. Currency. Little allotted spaces in the concrete car parks of boyish chaos. The dear enemy hypothesis. Commodity. A fuck, a potential fuck, a darling, a love, a sweetheart, a bitch, a slut, a whore, a slag, a girlfriend, a *wife*. I spread makeup like Amazon war paint, eye to eye. I now pronounce you man and *wife*. My title, my untitled - a sorting system for my sexual availability - Miss, Mrs., Ms. *It's a baby girl*....Status. Sex. Status. Sex. Status. SEX.

I clench my eyes tight shut. When I open them the seats around me are empty. White picket isolation. I sense the genesis of detachment. Pieces are falling away. Paper mache stuck around a bright red balloon. I want to pop my brain with the same pin. Logical emotion. This is the feeling I might direct at cockroaches or pubic lice. It's nothing personal – they just have to go. I didn't want to live with them in the first place, or near them, or be a part of the places they blink and creep. Blink, blink, blink.... *let them have it*.

'In closing, some may ask why come here?' I am at the podium; I have reconnected with whatever split me and my wonderful, odious little alabaster twin 'Why encourage others to come?' The words are mine, but still warm, wet. They are crisp like a fresh script, with celery letters to chew. 0-calorie script. 'The wild tiger may despise its cage, but after a time it will not

even raise his head when a door opens. He has forgotten the world outside. That is why we are here; Miss Me, Mrs. Myself and Ms. I; it is to remember.'

① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

I belong here, with myself - desiring to possess little more than my own body. *I don't want a fight.* I didn't want a scene. I just wanted *this*. This divorce-talk. This anarcho-feminist thing. This is bra-less. Today I eat my banana in public. I've got tampons scattered on the dresser. Hair under my arms. Pez in my Pez dispenser. I walk home at night. This is designer Eden. And Adam? Outside he still eats his apple on the bus.

I look off the balcony the lightening licking the tops of the sorority houses, the colossus of black cloud and thunder booming up like Medea's chariot from the horizon. Then suddenly the thought. I can't go back. And below me I see Margaret's shadow creep the pool, slink to the edge, diving in, hardly making a splash.

① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

FILE TYPE: VIRAL

---



Dear Christine P. Izanne,

Thank you for your completion of the three-day probationary period. Please accept your owed shares in Genoveva Inc., calculable at one unit, equaling one permanent metafictional room of your own. As before we include the literary device 'Novella's Curtain', allowing full concealment of said location from male attention, intervention, and consequent possession until such time as you may wish to disclose its existence.

Sincerely,

Virginia Hemtry

Judith Christ

Uri Self

**DR. OF PARTHOGENETICS**

**CHICKEN & EGG LABORATORIES**

**O-CONSPIRATOR©**

# Commentary

---

The following commentary sets out to describe the planning, research and composition involved in the writing of *Novella's Curtain*, as well as to place the work in a critical context. The opening section will address sources of inspiration and the development of key ideas. Thereafter the following sections will look at the larger concepts behind the piece and the vital authors and critics used as framing devices. The remaining sections will concern the practical application of these creative and contextual elements, explaining critical choices in addition to the use of characters, language, and literary devices.

Ultimately, the genesis of *Novella's Curtain* lies with my first reading of Christine de Pizan's (1363-c.1430) *The Book of the City of Ladies* (circa 1405). The piece is a salient defense of women, empowered by Pizan's use of allegory. The use of classical medieval story-telling structure, that is multiple stories unified by a shared theme or framing device, serves to enable her powerful representation of feminine diversity and significance. Story-telling was a popular literary device of the medieval period, employed by Chaucer and Boccaccio, but also by women writers such as Marguerite de Navarre (in her *Heptaméron*). It is also, of course, a structure used by contemporary novelists, from Italo Calvino to Douglas Coupland and David Mitchell.

However, perhaps what is most striking about Pizan's work is its ongoing relevance:

Although *The Book of the City of Ladies* was written more than half a millennium ago, it is filled with potent observations of our times. The querelle des femmes - the woman question in late fourteenth-and fifteenth-century France - articulated its arguments in much the same way as today's debate about the equality of women.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Marina Warner, foreword, Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (New York: Persea Books, 1982), xiii-xvii (pp.xiii-xiv).

Though Pizan's words remain 'potent', I felt inspired to bring them closer to 'today's debate about the equality of women'. The diversity of voices within the feminist community reflects in many ways the diversity of voices Pizan uses to defend women. For this reason I considered Pizan's structure appropriate for what I intended for my own piece. Genoveva's question about women – what does it mean to be a woman? - could not be answered by a single voice, any more than Pizan could defend women with just one. The following quotation from Ellen Rooney, Professor of English and Gender studies at Brown University, illustrates the contentious nature of this area within feminism:

What does the feminist critic mean when she says "women"? Biologically female persons? Individuals who have been socialized as "feminine"? ...Or perhaps "women" signifies sexual difference as it is figured by psychoanalysis or the critique of phallocentrism, which aligns femininity with the divided subject... This last option stresses the differences *within* femininity and masculinity, differences that phallocentrism masks in order to leave us with the illusion of a firm opposition between men and women and the fantasy of a feminine essence, of Women as a unitary subject.<sup>2</sup>

In order to avoid representing women as this 'unitary subject', I required both diverse voices and characters; this meant variations age, race, and sexual orientation. Where Pizan used prominent women and goddesses from history, I thought to use modern female archetypes. Iconic modern women such as movie stars and pop idols are arguably goddesses in their own rights - the paradigms of our contemporary aspirations. Where the stories of Ancient Greek goddesses are evoked in red- and black-figure pottery, a modern-day pantheon of footballer's wives, child stars, and fashion moguls are kept alive through the mythologies and scandals sold in our tabloids. My

---

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Rooney, Introduction, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* (USA: Cambridge, University Press, 2008), 1-26 (pp.5-6).

intention was to explore the space between these voices and those invoked by Pizan – could they similarly be use to explore and defend ‘women’?

In order to create a physical and metaphysical space for these women and voices I had to construct a contemporary version of Pizan’s ‘city’. This meant looking at where my work was placed contextually. If I wanted to recreate a modern-day version of the city I sensed a postmodern style and structure would provide the necessary freedom to realize my creative vision. For example, it meant I was not bound to a linear narrative, that I could be experimental with chapter style and separation, as well as exploring a metafictional placement of the city. It was this metafictional aspect which lead me to thinking about the work of Virginia Woolf, specifically *A Room of One’s Own*. Writer Janet Bukovinsky Teacher observes in Woolf’s work a unique commitment to creatively portraying the struggles of women, particularly as writers:

Woolf’s examinations of women’s places in society and their relationships with men went beyond her contemporaries’ passions for “mere” suffragism. In her landmark essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), she pondered the obstacles that might have confronted Shakespeare’s hypothetical sister had she been seized by her renowned sibling’s desire to write drama. Woolf noted that throughout history, women had been married against their wills, forced to bear more children than they wanted, and deprived of both education and privacy – all nigh-insurmountable obstacles to the writing life.<sup>3</sup>

These critical observations and the prescribed remedy, given in the title, served to inspire the metaphysical space created in *Novella’s Curtain*. In Woolf’s essay she describes how an inheritance allows her to afford a literal room of her own. Similarly I initially intended for Genoveva to be a tangible place. However, I sensed that this might be open to a familiar criticism of Woolf’s work and feminism more generally; too often, these voices come from a position of privilege. Woolf was a white woman born in London to an aristocratic family,

---

<sup>3</sup> Janet Bukovinsky Teacher, *Women of Words* (London: Running Press, 2002), p.75.

therefore to prescribe a literal space fails to take into account the existence of women of poverty, or others without means. Consequently, by creating Genoveva as a metaphysical space – essentially a creative space private and alive in the minds of all women – it can encompass the diversity within feminism.

Similarly, it was Woolf's story of the inheritance which shaped the essential story arc of *Novella's Curtain*, together with the subsequent development of the character Christine. Woolf describes the lack of independence and freedom she feels. This, she claims, has created within her a 'poison of fear and bitterness'<sup>4</sup>. However once she has a room of her own she describes a complementary internal transformation:

I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me. So imperceptibly I found myself adopting a new attitude towards the other half of the human race... They are driven by instincts which are not within their control.  
(Woolf, p.9)

This is the same transformation Christine gradually undergoes in *Novella's Curtain*. The story begins with bitterness - excessive drinking, alienation and loss of identity - but gradually she evolves. Just as Woolf describes how, in her liberated state, 'whenever I change a ten-shilling note a little of that rust and corrosion is rubbed off; fear and bitterness go' (Woolf, p.9), Christine too finds that fear and bitterness rub off a little after each story she hears. The key turning point is the final conversation with Ashley, in which she – like Woolf – explores to what extent 'instincts' or biological determinism play a part in being a woman. Christine reaches much the same conclusion as Woolf: 'Indeed my aunt's legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentlemen, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky.' (Woolf, p.10) Both Woolf and Christine conclude their

---

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Great Britain: Harcourt Inc., 1929), p.9.



journey by finding in a simple image - an open sky - their own quiet epiphany. They are finally free.

Woolf was not the only feminist voice used to frame the ideas explored in *Novella's Curtain*. Joan Smith's *Misogynies* played an important role in several key ways. For example, whereas Pizan can appear to contradict herself, Smith appears more balanced. Although Pizan seeks to defend women, too often she appears to do it within the parameters of patriarchal expectations of what constitutes the 'good woman'. She urges women to 'keep your eyes lowered, with few words in your mouths, and act respectfully' (Pizan, p. 256) and seems to hold 'defending your honor and chastity' (Pizan, p.256) as the pinnacle of feminine excellence. As such it is the Virgin Mary who is allotted the place of ruler of Pizan's city. However, many feminists have argued that chastity and sexual honour have little to do with what make women great; in fact, the denial of their sexuality and personal identity if anything cheapens their existence. As such there is an undeniable sense that while Pizan argues for women, she still upholds patriarchal ideals of femininity. This is where Smith became vital to reshaping this defence. The following excerpt illustrates how Smith does the opposite of Pizan in that she questions rather than celebrates what she considers a reprehensible 'docility' in Pizan's champion:

The Annunciation gives women a role in what is otherwise a male-dominated tale, and it is one which provides them with a nice, passive example to follow. Mary is nothing more than a receptacle, a useful vessel, but she will be cherished, admired, and even (in the more Mariolatrous houses of the Christian Church) worshipped as long as she stays in line. Her very place in history is contingent on her docility.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Joan Smith, *Misogynies* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp.66-7.

Whereas Pizan urges women to ‘cultivate virtue’ (Pizan, p. 257) and refers to Mary as ‘the head of the feminine sex’ (Pizan, p. 218), Smith is able to show the hypocrisy in such a statement. Consequently the head of the city in *Novella’s Curtain* would not be concerned with the patriarchal ideals of female docility or chastity, rather trueness to herself and the changing realities of her sex.

In order to do this, I followed Smith’s example by using a voice which also challenges patriarchal ideals - this time about feminism itself. Contemporary misconceptions about feminists often involve a false portrayal of them as dour, unapproachable individuals. Smith renounces this idea through her use of language. Her sharp wit and humour coupled with her relatable experiences make *Misogynies* a stark protest against the false archetype of the heavy-handed feminist. This method became key in creating the voice and characteristics of Christine. Like *Misogynies*, I wanted *Novella’s Curtain* to read as accessible and funny, while not obstructing the intrinsic feminist issues. Though Christine is aware from the beginning that she is a stereotype, through the course of the story she gradually subverts this persona, showing herself to be a more complex and dualistic character, capable of both resilience and change.

Developing the character of Christine involved some important decisions. Firstly, her name draws on Pizan herself and the persona adopted in her *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Secondly, an emotional distance was created between Christine and her mother. Coupled with the recent death of the mother, this distance became a key plot device to bring about the necessary sense of crisis and symbolic loss of feminine identity and sense of place. Christine’s sexuality in turn added another dimension to this emotional disorientation. In many ways the absence of emotional ties, both familial and sexual, intentionally places Christine’s character in a state of flux, symbolic of a kind of literary feminist rite of passage. It also alludes to the

traditional medieval quest structure, the character beginning as an empty vessel, much like The Fool in the Tarot story sequence. In doing this I was able to successfully create a protagonist with both depth and the necessary self-deprecating humour to keep her interesting to the reader.

The idea of the commune also represented key decisions made in the course of writing. Alluding to the separatist colonies of the 1960s and '70s, Genoveva as a woman-only commune represents both a literal history and present. In particular, it engages with the idea of lesbian separatism as both a political and spiritual movement and inspired the concept of a female retreat from masculine society. Language played an important role in placing this commune. I chose to include Americanisms and spellings in order to position Genoveva in the USA. I felt this allowed the story to benefit from the USA's reputation as a cultural and racial melting pot, as well as drawing on its associations with the tradition of Anglo-American feminism and the communes adopted by countercultural movements in the 1960s and '70s. It also enabled the Hollywood celebrity backdrop I wanted to help establish Genoveva as a luxurious retreat. However I was very conscious when shaping this environment to play neither into a utopian genre, nor a dystopian one. The key was to create a balance, and at times a visible tension between the two. That is, though the environment is affluent, described as a 'designer Eden', there is still enough grounding in both temperamental company and food, to maintain a sense of realism.

The depiction of the inhabitants of Genoveva also reflects this sense of duality and inner tension. Celebrity as a lifestyle is itself sold as a kind of utopian existence. However I wanted to create a strong sense of the dystopian aspects within this lifestyle, which is in turn symbolic of the necessarily fallible sides of both feminism and women as human beings. Smith's observations of Marilyn Monroe were particularly inspirational in developing this effect:

The lonely, ignored child who never knew a stable home grew into a woman with a lust, a burning desire – but for power, not for sex. She pursued it in the only way she knew, single-mindedly exploiting her sole asset like a foolhardy miner who dares to work a deeper seam than his safety-minded colleagues, never divining that the success she sought contained within it her inevitable destruction. For the power that Norma Jean Mortenson coveted was only the power to be a victim; the sexual exhibitionism which seemed to enslave men in reality made victims not of them but of herself. (Smith, p. 117)

This is an example of the ironic, paradoxical nature of celebrity which I aspired to portray through my own characters. Reagan represents the ebbing of that time between childhood and womanhood, but also a secondary sense of maturation – one of disillusionment with contemporary human relationships. Margaret symbolizes the struggle between feminine identity and feminine commodities, mirrored in the consequent essential tension between success and failure in our society. Sunday illustrates the space between past and present, both adaptation and deterioration, reason and non-reason, feminine power and religious doctrine. Ashley poses the necessary questions about sex and sexuality, the struggle between identification and identity through language. Fei Yen in turn questions the existence of choice and responsibility, representing both places of privilege and poverty. The complexity of these characters and their respective levels of disillusionment with the outside world serves to portray the innate complexity of the human experience, of the female experience, and is therefore in some ways a defense of women against even Pizan herself, for to whittle women down to mere vessels of virtue and goodness negates this valuable and essential presence of duality and balance.

Other key choices included finding a name for my commune, as well as an appropriate name for my piece. The name ‘Genoveva’ seemed fitting for the commune/organization for two reasons. Firstly, it is an amalgamation of the Latin ‘*geno*’ (refers to origin, creation, or line of descent), and ‘*viva*’, meaning alive. Secondly, it alludes to the opera (1850) of the same name by Robert Schumann. In the opera, the character Genoveva is initially wrongfully discredited by a

benevolent male force, suffers imprisonment and almost death, but then in due course is restored to her rightful honour.

The title for the piece, *Novella's Curtain*, alludes to the literal curtain the Italian scholar Novella d'Andrea (b. 1333) supposedly lectured from behind in order to prevent distraction or unwanted attention from her male students. The concept of partially detaching or distorting the female voice from its female form seemed pertinent to what my piece strived to do. Furthermore, the title in itself alludes to a significant principle: the very form of a woman is so sexualized by patriarchal society it must be hidden in order to let its voice be understood. Essentially it suggests that it is better for the voice to be disembodied, anonymous, than to belong to a vessel that has been commodified and misrepresented by patriarchal society. *Novella's Curtain* in some ways subverts this idea, in its place portraying the curtain as a protective force, rather than an alienating one. It is indicated by the letter that the curtain aids in the creation of positive separatism, a room where likeminded women can come together in solidarity; Novella no longer need sit there alone.

The theme of solidarity is one that appears strongest in the closing chapters. In particular, Christine's realization that it is she on the podium, that this is her space, is a moment which serves to collect all the separate stories and voices. However, rather than imposing new ideas of intolerance, Christine's message is indeed one of solidarity, of reflection. As with Woolf, the feelings of bitterness and fear have fallen away; her message points to the construction of a new place, rather than the destruction of the existing one. The device of the letter at the very end of the piece supports the direction and success of this concept, also establishing the metaphysical context in which it can exist. The letter invokes similar ideas of solidarity through its business-like uniformity, the insinuation that this message can and perhaps will be eventually emailed to

all women. Just as the invention of the postbox liberated women's communication with one another (previously letters would have to be sent care of a male relation), so also the internet symbolizes an even greater liberation of female communication worldwide.

The signatures to this message allude to these notions. 'Virginia Hemtry' is an anagram for 'I the Virgin Mary'. This is included, with the added qualification in parthenogenesis, partly in humour and partly with greater significance. The term parthogenesis comes from the Greek '*parthenos*' meaning 'virgin', and genesis meaning '*birth*'. By including this term I intended to hint at a problem in the basis of a female separatist community: one of reproduction. There are no mothers mentioned in *Genoveva* – a wry comment on the sterility of separatism taken literally. It can be noted throughout *Novella's Curtain* I have invoked science where Pizan invokes religion, Darwinism where she invokes Christianity. Though this can be interpreted as a critique of religion, my intention is to in fact represent the tension between the two – the space between reason and non-reason. Specifically, I wanted to allude to the idea that religion and science are one and the same: whereas Christianity presents truths through intuition and metaphor, science presents them through theory and experiment. My handling of this relationship between science and religion was largely inspired by Scarlett Thomas's novel *The End of Mr. Y*, in which a similar philosophical exploration between the two takes place. Consequently, the title 'Virginia Hemtry, Dr. of Parthogenetics' is representative of both the amalgamation of these seemingly oppositional forces, as well as a potential answer to the dilemma of reproduction in a female separatist commune.

The signature 'Judith Christ' similarly combines religion with another ideological imperative, in this instance feminism. The name Judith is an allusion to Woolf's ponderings on Shakespeare's hypothetical sister Judith Shakespeare. Consequently this name points to the

patriarchal biases and exclusion of women, both in Christian history and elsewhere. As in Woolf's work, it engages the reader into considering how history would have been different for both Judith and those after her, had she been given the same rights and privileges as the other sex. If Jesus Christ had been born Judith Christ, how might this have shaped Christianity and the world accordingly shaped by it? These ideas represent a 'chicken and the egg' style problem regarding misogyny. Which came first, male bias or misogyny? That is, is it an overzealous love of the masculine which has eclipsed women from history, or rather an overzealous disdain for the feminine? The two can function as separate processes, though intrinsically linked.

The final name, 'Uri Self', is a play on the word 'yourself'. It indicates the importance of personal truth and discovery over larger prescribed ideals. It symbolizes the necessity of one's own consent and desire to embark on the Genoveva quest; one must become a coconspirator to one's own escape to freedom. This in itself is perhaps the larger message behind *Novella's Curtain*.

# Bibliography

---

Bell, Susan Groag, 'Christine de Pizan (1364-1430): Humanism and the Problem of a Studious Woman', *Feminist Studies*, 3, (1976), 173-184

- Useful in researching the writer Christine de Pizan and renaissance humanist interest in the education of women.

*The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (USA: Cambridge, University Press, 2008)

- Essential in researching feminist perspectives and literary context of my piece.

Clewell, Carol, *Not Married, Not Bothered* (London: Harper Collins, 2005)

- A positive example of feminist stereotypes being challenged through humour.

Craven, Pat, *Living with the Dominator* (Great Britain: Freedom Publishing, 2008)

- Valuable in researching how women are affected by a patriarchal society of violence.

Dufresne, Laura Rinaldi, 'Christine de Pizan's "Treasure of the City of Ladies": A Study of Dress and Social Hierarchy', *Woman's Art Journal*, 16, (1996), 29-34

- Helpful in researching the life of Christine de Pizan and her creative works.

Erdal, Jennie, *Ghosting* (Great Britain: Canongate Books Ltd., 2004)

- A useful example of the feminine voice being detached from the feminine form through ghostwriting.

Hindman, Sandra L., 'With Ink and Mortar: Christine De Pizan's "Cité des Dames"', *Feminist Studies*, 10, (1984), 457-483

- Key research into the life of Christine de Pizan and her creative work.

Holder, Judith, *The Secret Diary of a Grumpy Old Woman* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006)

- A useful example of wit and humour as devices to portray the complexities of the female experience.

Laennec, Christine Moneera, 'Unladylike Polemics: Christine de Pizan's Strategies of Attack and Defense', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 12, (1993), 47-59

- Research into Christine de Pizan's authorial position and her misogynist opponents.

Lamott, Anne, *Bird by Bird* (USA: Anchor Books, 1995)

- A useful writing guide, helpful in the initial planning and character building stages.

Pizan, Christine de, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (New York: Persea Books, 1982)

- The core inspiration for my own piece.



Scanlon, Gisele, *The Goddess Experience* (London: Harper Collins, 2008)

- Inspiring female quest for happiness and sense of place.

Smith, Joan, *Misogynies* (London: Vintage, 1996)

- Research into feminism, misogyny, and the duality of the celebrity lifestyle.

Sheindlin, Judge Judy, *Don't Pee on My Leg and Tell Me It's Raining* (USA: Harper Collins, 1996)

- Inspiring comments on the failings of modern society and its judicial system, particularly for women.

Teacher, Janet Bukovinsky, *Women of Words* (London: Running Press, 2002)

- Helpful in researching Virginia Woolf as well as other pivotal feminist writers from history.

Thomas, Scarlett, *The End of Mr. Y* (Great Britain: Canongate Books Ltd., 1998)

- Inspired the inclusion of postmodern and metafictional aspects as well as tensions between religion and science.

Wollstonecraft, Mary, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Penguin, 2004)

- Inspirational feminist treatise useful in developing the politics of Genoveva.

Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own* (Great Britain: Harcourt Inc., 1929)

- Inspired themes, character arcs, and separatist space for women.

Zipes, Jack, *Don't Bet on the Prince* (England: Gower, 1986)

- Useful collection of feminist allegorical fairy tales, useful in shaping my own short allegorical stories.